

Women's Socio-Cultural Status in the Tharu Community: A Case of Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali

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Abstract

Nepal, characterized by its multi-ethnic composition, hosts a diverse population of approximately 125 castes and ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural practices and beliefs. Among these groups, the Tharu people constitute a significant indigenous community, comprising about 6.6% of Nepal's total population. Historically settled in the Terai region, near forested areas and the Inner Terai, Tharus are culturally and linguistically diverse, with distinct sub-groups dispersed across various regions of Nepal. Tharu society traditionally embodies a rich cultural heritage, marked by unique customs and attire. Despite their agricultural prowess and reliance on forest resources for livelihoods, Tharu women face significant socio-economic challenges. They are often relegated to domestic and subsistence roles, with limited access to education and economic resources compared to men. While some sub-groups within the Tharu community exhibit exceptions to these norms, such as the Rana Tharus with their female-dominant societal structure, broader societal and economic barriers persist. This study focuses on Janaki Rural Municipality of Kailali district, aiming to explore the socio-cultural status of Tharu women. Through structured questionnaires, interviews, and observations, the research investigates household decision-making dynamics, educational disparities, and barriers hindering women from achieving higher social standing. The findings underscore the complex interplay of cultural norms, gender roles, and socio-economic factors influencing the status of Tharu women within their community. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and social inequalities among Nepal's Tharu population, offering insights for targeted interventions to improve their socio-cultural and economic conditions.

Keywords: status of woman, socio-cultural context, Tharu community, indigenous community

Introduction

With around 125 different castes and ethnic groups, each with unique religious customs and beliefs, Nepal is a multiethnic state. The Tharu people are among the second-largest indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal among them. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2021) estimates that Tharus make up around 6.6% of all people living in Nepal. They have historically made their home across the Terai region, frequently residing near to the Inner Terai and highly wooded regions. With sub-groups like the Morang Kochila in Jhapa, Morang, and Sunsari; the Dangoura and Desauri in Udaypur, Saptari, and the Midwestern Terai; the Rana Tharus in Kailali and Kanchanpur; and the Paschuhan and Purbaha in Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, and Nawalparasi, the Tharu community is culturally and linguistically diverse.

Historically, the Tharus have been a reclusive and very shy people, with some of the first towns being tucked away in dense forests, apart from other ethnic groups. They have historically been taken advantage of by the government and, to a lesser degree, are still being outwitted by the non-Tharu groups that surround them. Because they utilize their grain to make alcoholic beverages, Tharus people usually experience financial difficulties in their homes and businesses and end themselves in debt. Historically, shrewder people from the hills have exploited this by lending money to Tharus, which has resulted in mounting debt and eventual land loss.

With unique rituals and traditional clothing, the Tharu group has a rich cultural legacy. For example, cholya (top garment), lehenga, and lungi (a form of wrapper for the lower body) are the usual attire worn by Tharu women. Folk performing arts, such as folk dance and theater, also require unique costumes. In the Terai area, the Tharus are known for being expert peasant farmers who mostly depend on agricultural and forest resources for their subsistence. In addition to raising cattle including cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep, pigs, and chickens, they also produce crops like vegetables, wheat, barley, and rice.

The involvement of women is essential to development initiatives since their management of the home has a direct impact on men's productivity when working outside the home. But when it comes to issues like poor health, illiteracy, unemployment, and societal constraints, women in Nepal—including those from the Tharu community—generally bear more of the weight than males. Women in the Tharu culture are frequently restricted to household and subsistence work, with little appreciation for the economic contributions they provide. Despite being involved in both domestic and outdoor activities, women in the Tharu community nevertheless have a lesser social standing than males. The Rana Tharus are an outlier, with a culture still dominated by women.

The primary focus of this study is to examine the socio-cultural status of Tharu women in Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali, exploring their daily experiences, challenges, and the interdependence of gender roles within the community. The research aims to address the following questions:

1. How do Tharu women navigate their socio-cultural status within household decision-making in Janaki Rural Municipality?
2. What factors contribute to the educational backwardness of Tharu women?
3. What barriers prevent Tharu women from achieving higher social status?

Objectives of the Study

- To investigate women's sociocultural standing within the Tharu society as it relates to household decision-making.
- To evaluate the employment, property ownership, and education levels of Tharu women.

Review of Past Study

Scholars are still at odds about the Tharu people's origins; no clear consensus has been achieved. While some academics use etymological evidence to track their origins, others depend on folklore. Despite speaking an Aryan language, Pyakural (1982) claims that the Tharu, with their unique physical and facial traits, most likely come from Mongoloid heritage. In the past, the Tharu could have embraced Buddhism before Hinduism had an impact on them.

Gautam and Magar (1994) offer a different perspective, proposing that Tharu lineage traces back to Rajput women who fled into the forests of the Terai to escape Muslim invaders in Rajputana. These women, along with their male servants, formed a new community whose descendants became known as the Tharu. Bista (1967) supports this view, asserting that the Tharu likely migrated from the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India, during the Islamic invasions.

Acharya (1979) highlights that traditional societal norms significantly hinder women's full participation in economic development, resulting in limited decision-making power. The conventional belief that women are solely responsible for reproduction and child-rearing further restricts their involvement in the development process, contributing to their lower status compared to men. Acharya emphasizes the importance of recognizing women's contributions to economic development to improve their decision-making power and societal status.

Acharya and Bennett (1981) conducted extensive studies on the status of women in Nepal, noting that women, particularly in the Tharu community, contribute significantly to both agricultural and household activities. Despite their substantial labor input, women's contributions are often undervalued, leading to a lower status within the household and society. The Central Bureau of Statistics (2001) indicates that women make up half of Nepal's population, yet their economic roles are frequently unrecognized, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles prevail.

Bista (1967) describes the Tharu as one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Terai region, with a distinct culture influenced by various other groups. Tharu society is traditionally patriarchal, with polygamous marriages and a strong emphasis on family hierarchy. Rajaure (1981) notes that the status of Tharu women varies depending on individual circumstances, though they generally have more flexibility and alternatives compared to women in other Nepalese communities.

Pyakural (1982) and R. Gautam and A.K. Magar (1994) highlight the unique status of women among the Rana Tharu, where women enjoy a higher status and greater autonomy. Conversely, Eng and Hender (2000) emphasize the challenges faced by Tharu women, including limited educational opportunities and economic hardship, which contribute to their overall lower status.

While numerous studies have explored various aspects of the Tharu community and the status of women in Nepal, there is a lack of comprehensive research specifically focused on the socio-cultural status of Tharu women in Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali. Most existing studies provide a broad overview of gender issues and the historical context of the Tharu people but do

not delve into the specific socio-cultural dynamics and daily life experiences of Tharu women in this particular area. This study aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural status of Tharu women, their challenges, and their roles within their community.

Research Methodology

Study Area Overview

This study was conducted in the Kailali district. According to the Rural Municipality profile of 2021, the total population of the study area 49,860, with Tharu women constituting the largest demographic group, numbering 15,600. The total population of Tharu women in Kailali district is 167,316 (CBS, 2021).

Research Design

The research follows an exploratory design aimed at investigating the socio-cultural status of married Tharu women in the study area. This descriptive study focuses exclusively on the Janaki Rural Municipality of Kailali district.

Data Collection Nature and Sources

The study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through questionnaires, interviews with key informants, and direct observations. Secondary data were obtained from various published and unpublished sources, including the Janaki Rural Municipality profile, Kailali district DDC profile, CBS 2021 profile, and documents from the Tharu Kalyankarni office.

Primary Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through field surveys employing several techniques such as structured questionnaires, interviews with key informants, and observations.

Structured Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires were used to interview sampled women about their literacy, occupation, property ownership, and decision-making roles in various aspects such as livestock and agricultural goods transactions, household purchases, domestic expenditures, health and sanitation care, children's education, and family planning.

Interviews with Key Informants

Interviews were conducted with local teachers, Rural Municipality representatives, elder persons, husbands of the women, and social workers. These discussions focused on women's education, occupation, family background, and other relevant status indicators within the study area.

Observations

Observations were made to collect information on women's participation in daily activities, their roles in household chores, and their involvement in household decision-making processes. Observational data were used to support structured data where relevant, recognizing that human nature often leads individuals to hesitate in revealing weaknesses.

Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data were collected from various published and unpublished materials from related organizations, including the Rural Municipality profile of Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali district DDC profile, CBS 2021 profile, and documents from the Tharu Kalyankarni office.

Sampling Procedure

The universe population for this study includes all Tharu women residing in Janaki Rural Municipality. The sample unit consists of Tharu households. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), there are 11,041 households within the nine wards of Janaki Rural Municipality. This study focuses on three wards with the highest concentrations of Tharu households (wards 2, 3, and 4), containing 85, 85, and 80 households respectively, all within the buffer zone. A proportional sample size of more than 10% was selected, resulting in 11 households from ward 2, 10 from ward 3, and 9 from ward 4, totaling 30 households. From each household, one married Tharu woman aged 20-60 was selected as a respondent through simple random sampling. Women below 20 years and above 60 years were excluded from the sample.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected primarily through field surveys, employing formal interview methods, structured questionnaires, and observations. Secondary data were also gathered from field surveys, textbooks, statistical reports, and previous research studies.

Data Analysis Methods

Collected data were transcribed into Excel to facilitate analysis. Simple and appropriate mathematical and statistical tools such as tabulation, percentages, means, frequencies, and graphical presentations were employed for data analysis.

Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the socio-cultural status of women in the Tharu community within the limited geographical area of Janaki Rural Municipality in Kailali district. Consequently, the conclusions or generalizations derived from this study may not be applicable to other regions of the nation.

Analysis of Data and Findings

Profile of the Study Area

Janaki Rural Municipality in Kailali district of Seti zone, Nepal, was selected as the study area. According to the 2021 census, Kailali district has a total population of 904,666, with 433,456 males and 471,210 females, covering an area of 2,025 square kilometers. The district comprises 195,957 households. Janaki Rural Municipality is located 12.4 kilometers south from Lamki Chuha Municipality and 6.7 kilometers north from the Tikapur Municipality. Total area of rural municipality is 107.27 square kilometers (41.42 sq mi) and it is divided into 9 wards. As per the VDC profile of 2021, Janaki Rural Municipality has a total population of 49,860, consisting of 23,198 males and 26,662 females, distributed among 11,041 households.

Socio-Economic Status of the Respondents

Marital Status

Only married women between the ages of 20 and 60 participated in the study. One important social factor affecting women's socioeconomic standing is their marital status. The early marriage custom in Nepal has a profound effect on women's roles and obligations, changing them from daughters to daughters-in-law. Table 1 displays the respondents' marital status distribution.

Table 1

Marital Status of the Respondents

S.N.	Marital Status	No. of Respondents	Percent
1.	Married	28	90
2.	Widowed	3	10
	Total	30	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table reveals that out of 30 sampled households, 90% are married women and 10% are widowed. Married and widowed women experience differing societal treatments, with married women often facing reduced personal freedom and rights, while widows encounter social stigma and blame.

Family Structure

Family structures in the study area are categorized into nuclear and joint families. While many Tharu families still practice joint living arrangements, a growing number have adopted nuclear family structures, which typically afford greater decision-making autonomy and socio-economic indicators. The distribution among sample households is presented in Table 2.

Table 2***Family Structure of Sample Household***

S.N.	Family Type	No. of Respondents	Percent
1	Joint	22	73.33
2	Nuclear	08	26.66
Total		30	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table indicates that 73.33% of sampled households are joint families, while 26.66% are nuclear families, illustrating the predominant family structure among Tharus in the study area.

Education Status

Education serves as a significant factor in personal development and social status measurement within communities. For women especially, education enhances social standing and community involvement. The educational status of sampled households is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3***Education Status of Household Couples***

Educational Status	No. of Respondents (Male)	Percent (Male)	No. of Respondents (Female)	Percent (Female)	Total
Illiterate	5	17.85	13	43.33	18
Primary	9	32.14	10	33.33	19
Secondary	8	28.58	5	16.67	13
Intermediate	4	14.29	2	6.67	6
Bachelor and above	2	7.14	-	-	2
Total	28	100	30	100	58

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

According to the table, 17.85% of males are illiterate, 32.14% have completed elementary school, 28.58% have completed secondary school, 14.29% have completed intermediate school, and 7.14% have completed a bachelor's degree or above. In contrast, 43.33% of females lack literacy, 33.33% have completed elementary school, 16.67% have completed secondary school, and 6.67% have completed intermediate school; none have

completed a bachelor's degree or beyond. This highlights the fact that women in the study region have a greater percentage of illiteracy than do men.

Occupational Status of Sample Households

The main source of revenue, which reflects an individual's economic situation, is their occupation. In Janaki Rural Municipality, Tharus's occupations are dominated by agriculture and animal husbandry. Table 4 provides specifics on the employment trends.

Table 4

Occupation of Sample Households

Occupation	No. of Respondents (Male)	Percent (Male)	No. of Respondents (Female)	Percent (Female)	Total
Agriculture	8	28.58	10	33.33	18
Service	4	14.28	2	6.67	6
Business	4	14.28	1	3.33	5
Tailoring	-	-	6	20	6
Carpentry	5	17.86	-	-	5
Wage labor	3	10.72	4	13.33	7
Household works	-	-	5	16.67	5
Others	4	14.28	2	6.67	6
Total	28	100	30	100	58

(Source: Field Survey, 2024)

The table reveals that 28.58% of males are engaged in agriculture, while 33.33% of females predominantly work in agriculture. Other significant occupations include service, business, tailoring, carpentry, wage labor, household work, and miscellaneous activities such as livestock sales and handicrafts.

Pattern of Land Holding

Land ownership is a critical resource influencing both economic and social status within the Tharu community. The distribution of land holdings among sampled households is presented in Table 5.

Table 5*Land Holding Pattern of Sampled Households*

Land holding in Kattha	No. of HHs	Percent
0-3	2	6.67
3-6	3	10
6-9	3	10
9-12	5	16.67
12-15	6	20
15-18	7	23.33
18 and above	4	13.33
Total	30	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table illustrates that the majority of sampled households (approximately 76.67%) own up to 15 Kattha of land. Those owning more than 3 Bigha (20 Kattha = 1 Bigha) often cultivate additional land on a sharecropping basis.

Property in Women's Ownership

Women in Nepal traditionally have limited access to property ownership, contributing to their economic vulnerability. The distribution of property ownership among female respondents is outlined in Table 6.

Table 6*Distribution of Sampled Respondents by Women's Ownership in Property*

Types of Property	No. of Respondents	Percent
House	3	10
Land	5	16.67
Livestock	7	23.33
institutions deposit	9	30
No ownership	6	20
Total	30	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table indicates that 10% of respondents reported female ownership of houses, 16.67% reported ownership of land, 23.33% reported ownership of livestock, and 30% reported

ownership of assets in financial institutions. However, 20% of women reported having no ownership of any family property.

Women Participation in Informal Education

Participation in adult literacy classes plays a crucial role in improving women's literacy rates and overall empowerment. The involvement of respondents in such programs is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7

Participation of Respondents in Adult Literacy Classes

Yes/No	No. of Respondents	Percent
Yes	7	53.84
No	6	46.15
Total	13	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table shows that 53.84% of illiterate respondents participated in adult literacy classes, while 46.15% did not.

Preferred Place of Treatment by Respondent Women

Healthcare preferences among women reflect socio-economic factors and cultural beliefs. The preferred places for treatment among respondents are detailed in Table 8.

Table 8

Preferred Place of Treatment by the Respondent Women

Preferred Place of Treatment	No. of Respondents	Percent
Hospital	2	6.66
Private clinic	17	56.66
Health center	5	16.66
Shaman/Healer (Guruwa)	6	20
Total	30	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table indicates that 6.66% of women prefer hospitals for treatment, 56.66% prefer private clinics, 16.66% prefer health centers, and another 20% seek treatment from traditional

healers (Shamans/Guruwa), influenced by educational limitations, traditional beliefs, and economic constraints.

Role of Women in Decision Making Process

Decision-making abilities serve as a significant indicator of social status and empowerment. This section examines women's roles in decision-making processes across various household and agricultural management aspects.

Farm Management

Women's involvement in farm management decision-making spans crop planning and livestock management, reflecting their evolving roles in household and community dynamics.

Table 9

Cropping Pattern and Decision Making Roles in Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali

Farm Activities	Decision Maker Person		Total
	Male	Percent Female	
Seed Selection	12	42.86	5
Plunging Planting	7	25	5
Spreading Manure	13	46.42	4
Irrigation	17	60.71	3
Harvesting	6	21.42	4

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table above delineates the allocation of decision-making responsibilities across various agricultural activities within the study area. For instance, in the domain of seed selection, a predominant 42.86% of decisions are made by males, whereas females contribute only 17.86%, with joint decisions by both genders accounting for 39.28%. This indicates a notable disparity in women's involvement in decision-making roles for this activity.

Similarly, in the context of ploughing activities, joint decision-making by both men and women is the most prevalent at 57.14%, surpassing individual contributions by males (25%) and females (17.86%). This trend underscores a collaborative approach in decision-making processes related to field ploughing. In contrast, planting activities demonstrate a significant role reversal, with women taking lead in decision-making at 53.57%, followed by joint decisions (32.14%) and a smaller male contribution (14.29%). This shift highlights women's predominant influence in decisions pertaining to planting activities compared to their male counterparts.

Regarding the spreading of manure, decisions are primarily influenced by males (46.42%), with joint efforts comprising 39.29% and a minor female contribution (14.29%). This

distribution illustrates a pronounced male dominance in decision-making concerning manure spreading practices. In irrigation activities, men hold substantial decision-making authority at 60.71%, while women's involvement is notably lower at 10.71%, with joint decisions accounting for 28.58%. This disparity underscores a significant gender gap in decision-making roles related to irrigation practices.

Finally, in harvesting activities, joint decision-making by both genders prevails at 64.29%, followed by male contributions at 21.42% and female contributions at 14.29%. This collaborative approach highlights the shared responsibility in decision-making processes pertaining to harvesting activities.

Decision Making

In Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali, both men and women play significant roles in livestock management. Given that income from agriculture alone often proves insufficient to sustain families, Tharu women assume crucial responsibilities in managing livestock to support household expenses. Livestock management is integral to agricultural activities, with households raising various animals such as goats, pigs, ducks, chickens, pigeons, swans, cows, buffaloes, and oxen. These animals and their by-products like milk, ghee, butter, and curd are sold for additional income. Men primarily engage in caring for and herding the livestock, while women are predominantly involved in tasks such as collecting fodder, cleaning sheds, feeding animals, and milking them. Both genders participate in selling livestock products at dairy markets to earn income, underscoring the collaborative effort in managing household finances. The decision-making roles in farm management related to livestock are detailed in Table 10.

Table 10

Decision Making Role in Livestock Management

Activities	Decision Maker	Total
Livestock purchase	Male	07
	Female	14
	Both	09
Livestock sale	Male	06
	Female	13
	Both	11
Sale of livestock products	Male	06
	Female	11
	Both	13
Management of money	Male	17
	Female	04
	Both	09

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

Analysis of the table reveals that women are significantly involved in decision-making regarding livestock purchases (46.66%), livestock sales (43.33%), and sale of livestock products (36.66%). In contrast, decisions concerning the management of income from livestock sales predominantly favor men (20%), with joint decision-making between men and women accounting for (36.66%).

Decision Making Role in Health Management

In order to study decision-making roles in health management, this section will concentrate on two main areas: employing family planning strategies and seeking treatment for family members.

Table 11

Decision Making Role in Health Management

Activities	Decision Make		Total
	Male	Female	
Seeking treatment	13 (43.34%)	7 (23.33%)	
Use of family planning method	6 (20%)	10 (33.33%)	

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The data reveals that 43.34% of men hold the predominant decision-making role in seeking treatment, whereas only 23.33% of women exercise minimal decision-making influence in this regard. Additionally, 33.33% of decisions are jointly made by both genders in seeking treatment. Hence, men predominantly decide on seeking treatment for family members compared to women.

In terms of family planning decisions, 33.33% of women exhibit decision-making authority, contrasting with only 20% of men involved in such decisions. However, the majority of decisions (46.67%) are made jointly by both genders, indicating a shared responsibility. Thus, women demonstrate a higher level of decision-making involvement in family planning methods compared to men.

The decision-making responsibilities in household management encompass the procurement of goods, financial transactions including lending and borrowing, sales of agricultural produce, and management of income and expenditure patterns.

Table 12*Decision Making Role in Household Management*

Decision Making Role in Household Management Aspect	Activities		Total
	Male Percent	Female Percent	Both Percent
Purchase of goods	8	26.67	17.00
Lending/ borrowing	9	30.00	5.00
Sale of agricultural products	8	28.57	5.00
Pattern of income expenditure	17	56.67	7.00

(Source: Field Survey, 2024).

The table indicates that women wield considerable decision-making authority, notably in the purchase of household goods (56.67%), while men's influence is more pronounced in financial transactions and income management, with 56.67% and 53.58% decision-making shares, respectively. Joint decision-making by both genders is evident across all activities, reflecting collaborative efforts in household management.

Summary

This analysis examines the socio-cultural status of women in terms of their educational attainment, property ownership, occupational engagement, and decision-making within Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali. The study area, located 12.4 kilometers south from Lamki Chuha Municipality and 6.7 kilometers north from the Tikapur Municipality, was selected due to its substantial Tharu population, as per the VDC profile of 2024. The total population of the area is 49,860, with females comprising 26,662 individuals across 11,041 households. The study specifically focuses on 30 households from wards 2, 3, and 4 within the Tharu community.

Tharu women in the study area experience varying degrees of dominance compared to their male counterparts, particularly evident among Rana Tharus, where a matriarchal social structure prevails. Early marriage practices are common, with girls typically marrying younger than boys. Of the surveyed respondents, 90% are married, while 10% are widowed. Household structures predominantly consist of joint (73.33%) and nuclear (26.66%) families.

Educationally, 32.14% of the Tharu population is literate, while 33.33% are illiterate, with females constituting a higher proportion of the illiterate group (43.33%) compared to males (17.85%). In terms of occupation, agriculture is the predominant livelihood for both genders, with 28.58% of males and 33.33% of females engaged in farming. Other occupations include service, business, carpentry, wage labor, and various informal sectors such as foreign employment and livestock management.

Land ownership varies significantly, with some households cultivating up to 3 bigha (approximately 1.2 hectares), while others engage in sharecropping arrangements (adhiya). Crops cultivated include paddy during summers and wheat, mustard, maize, potatoes, and onions during winters, contributing to moderate agricultural production.

Decision-making roles within households' highlight disparities between genders, with men typically dominating decisions related to agriculture and income management. Women, however, exercise significant authority over livestock management, healthcare decisions, and certain aspects of household expenditures.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Tharu women assume diverse roles and responsibilities within their families. They bear a significant burden of domestic chores, prioritizing household activities over income-generating pursuits such as agriculture, which largely serve family consumption rather than generating income. Although the literacy rate among Tharu women is gradually improving, their access to higher education remains limited due to various social, personal, and economic barriers, thereby restricting their opportunities for employment outside the household. Ownership of land, houses, and participation in financial institutions such as savings groups and cooperatives are predominantly low among Tharu women, who primarily possess livestock as their property, with few having formal property rights. The lack of higher education compels many Tharu women to engage extensively in agricultural activities, yet their decision-making authority within these realms is notably less than that of their male counterparts. While some areas show high female involvement in decision-making, overall, men hold superior decision-making roles across most domains within households. This disparity is largely attributed to traditional norms, a male-dominated culture, and limited educational opportunities for women.

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