

A Study of Aharya in Sattriya Drama with Reference to Sankaradeva's Literary Works'

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Abstract

This research paper analyses the costumes and appearances of the characters mentioned in Sankaradeva's *Kirtan* and *Bargeet*. In the presentation style of Sattriya drama, costume (Aharya) plays a significant role in enhancing aesthetic and spiritual expression. The study reveals that the descriptions of costumes of Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna in the *Kirtan* and *Bargeet* are largely similar, including references to the yellow dhoti, (Shyama) dark complexion, exquisite ornaments, golden necklaces (*Hemaharu*), bangles (*Kankana*), and crown (*Mukuta*). Some verses in the *Bargeet* provide separate descriptions of ornaments, highlighting the brilliance of devotion and divinity. Similar patterns are observed in the depictions of other characters as well; however, the *Bargeets* mainly focus on the divine forms of Vishnu and Krishna. This research shows that the Aharya of characters in Sattriya drama not only enhance aesthetic beauty but also acts as a significant symbol of spirituality and cultural tradition. Consequently, this study provides valuable insight into the accurate interpretation and preservation of traditional costumes in modern Sattriya dramatic performances.

Keywords: sattriya drama, sankaradeva, aharya, kirtan, bargeet.

INTRODUCTION

The Sattriya drama originated from the *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma* movement led by Sankaradeva in Assam. He utilised various literary works, such as *Ankiya Naat*, *Bargeet*, *Kirtan*, *Dashama*, etc., to disseminate the *Neo-Vaishnavite* Dharma among the common people (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025c). Additionally, he employed Sattriya Dance, drama and music as a medium for the propagation of the Dharma.

The four types of Abhinayas mentioned in the Shastras of classical dance and drama also exist in Sattriya dance and drama. The Aharya in Sattriya drama enhances the expressiveness of Abhinaya (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). Aharya shapes the visuals of the drama along with its characters, religious symbols and literary descriptions, which create a realistic stage performance. These costume variations are also mentioned in Sankaradeva's *Kirtan*, *Bargeet* and *Bhagavata*.

According to Natyashastra, Aharya abhinaya has four types of external elements. They are-*Pusta* (props and stage objects), *Alankara* (costume and ornaments), *Angarachana* (makeup), and *Sanjiva* (animals).

This research paper primarily covers *Alankara* and *Angarachana*, i.e. costume, makeup and ornaments.

1.1 Literature Review

Aharya of the Sattriya tradition can be observed in the writing of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva's literature, where costumes, colour composition, and ornaments are incorporated. Some books have discussed the Aharya of different characters of Sattriya drama and dance. Although there are many (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a) reputed works as well as journals and articles on Sattriya dance and music, a smaller number of works have dealt with Aharya (costume and makeup) issues in detail. Some important work, like:

- Dr Jagannath Mahanta's literary and research work, *The Sattriya Dance of Assam: An Analytical and Critical Study*, describes the Aharya used by the various characters in the Sattriya drama and performers of Sattriya dance in eight chapters (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c).
- Dr Tribeni Rekha Bez's research work, *Art and Crafts of the Satra Institution of Assam with Special Reference to Bhaona Mask Art* describes the traditional cloths,

designs and motifs, characteristics of the traditional Assamese textiles found in the *Satra* institution.

- Khagendra Nath Bora, in the book *Nandi* edited by Binapani Devi, wrote an article titled *Mahapurushiya Geet-Podot Aharya* which discusses the costumes and make-up as mentioned in the Bargeet and Ankiya Geet.
- The scholarly volume *Bhaona Aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*, under the editorship of Dr Nirupama Mahanta, published by the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, provides an in-depth examination of the attire utilised in Sattriya drama and Sattriya dance performance.

1.2 Methodology and Sources:

The methodology employed in this research paper is both descriptive and analytical in nature. Primary data are gathered from field studies, while secondary data are sourced from books, journals, and other materials. For writing this paper, the APA 7th edition is used.

1.3 Significance of the study:

Over the years, the transformation of Aharya and its dynamic use in Sattriya drama have opened vast and fascinating avenues for study and research. By studying the Aharya described in Sankaradeva's literature, one can gain a clearer understanding of the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the costumes used in Sattriya drama. Furthermore, it offers valuable insights on how to design and present the actual Aharya.

1.4 Aim and Objective of the Study

- 1) To study the use of Aharya in Sattriya Drama.
- 2) To study the Aharya of the characters mentioned in Sankaradeva's Kirtan.
- 3) To study the Aharya of the characters mentioned in Sankaradeva's Bargeet.

1.5 Scope of the study:

The Sattriya tradition and literature make significant contributions to the spiritual, moral, cultural, and educational aspects of Assamese life. This research paper focuses on the literary work of Sankaradeva's *Kirtan and Bargeet*. This research paper explores the *Alankara* (costumes and jewellery) and *Angarachana* of various characters in Sattriya drama.

The Aharya in Sattriya drama:

In Sattriya drama, the costumes for male and female characters have unique features that distinguish them. The ornaments also highlight Assam's rich heritage. Over time, these costumes have changed and been modified, but they still retain their traditional significance.

2.1 Male character costumes:

In the past, the male characters of Sattriya drama wore *Chouga*, *Chapkan*, *Choukan*, *Hingkhap*, *Balichari Chola*, *Bukuchola*, *Jamdani* and *Jali Chola* as their upper garments (*Uddhavasa*). Although the upper garments or robes were usually white, they were also made in black, *La-bulia* (red), yellow and orange according to the character (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026c). Except for the *Sutradhar* (narrator) and *Gayan-Bayan*, the other characters' upper garments were stitched with different borders of shining threads (*Gunas*) to make the costumes more radiant and eye-catching.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Male costumes (pictures taken from the book *Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*)



Figure 3

Male Costume *Chapkan* (Museum of Uttar Kamalabari Sattr)

The lower garments (*Adhovasa*) were *Bhuni* or *Dhoti*. Some of the characters wore *Bor ghuri* (large circular *Ghuris*) according to their upper garments. The heroic character (*Veer*) wore a *ghuri* from the waist to the knees, a several-layered & pleated, round design with *Poti*, which is called a *Chaya Ghuri*. Nowadays, the use of this particular *Ghuris* has disappeared altogether. Instead of *Chaya Ghuri*, the present actors use a pleated *Chapkan*. The male character wears northern or *Gati* clothes as his *Uddhavasa*. This *Gati* is folded equally in two, shaped like an English letter V on the back, flowing over the front arm and placed parallel to the front, slightly below the knee (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026a). The lower two parts (*Achal*) are tied with waistbands (*Tangali / Kanchi*) to prevent them from moving.

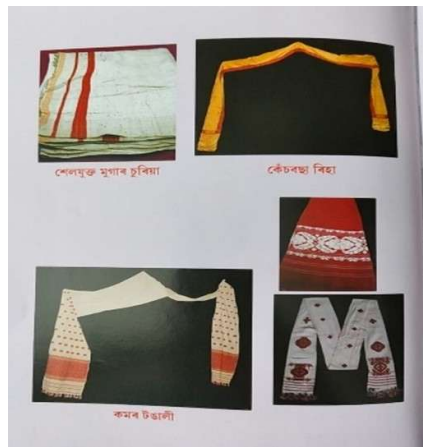


Figure 4

Gati kapur, Tongali, Dhoti

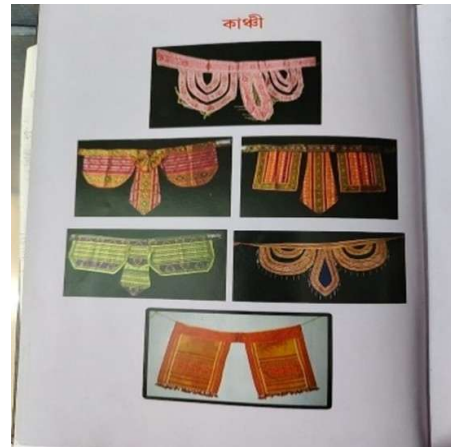


Figure 5

Kanchi and Achal for female

(pictures taken from the book *Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*)

The characters wear costumes that reflect their nature. For example, the character of the *Gosai* wears a yellow dhoti while the *Veer*, *Raja* and *Asuras* wear red, dark blue and black as lower wear (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026b). The character of *Banor* (*monkey*) wears a knee-length dhoti. High-class characters wear *Thor* (front-pleated) and *Punmora* (back pleated) dhotis. However, the lower characters wear only *Punmora* (back-pleated) dhotis. In the case of headgear, it is coloured with *Hengul-Haital* or a crown of similar colour. In *Dhirodhat* characters, kings wear *Doul Mukut*. The heroic characters wear dyed *Kalka* or star headgear in the colour of *Hengul-Haital*. Lower-ranking male characters, such as officers or *Mantri*, and *Senapati* wear turbans with tails at the back.



Figure 6

Headgear



Figure 7

Doul Mukut

(pictures taken from *Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*)

The ornaments are *Monimala* (made from gemstones & beads), *Monikundol* (earrings), *Baju* (armlets), etc. In terms of hairstyles, the *Gosai* character wears hair with *Alaka* (bangs), while the other characters use wigs and *Chapka* (curled hair). *Tilak* or *Phut* and *Rekha* (lines) are two types of forehead ornaments. Male characters especially wear *Urdhpunda Tilak*. In *Dhirodhat*, the kings put a three-pronged line. Heroes, generals, and others took a *Tilak* resembling the sun, stars, spears, and flowers (Deb et al., 2026).

2.2 Female character costumes:

Sarees are mentioned in the works of Sankaradeva, specifically in Kirtan's *Horomohona* as "*Pindhi haree khuntajali jeno moira kore chali.*" Female characters typically wear a *Lohonga* (plated, silk cloth) as a lower garment, paired with long or short-sleeved upper garments (*Buku sula*). To cover the torso, two wide fabric borders are draped across the shoulders, creating a 'V' shape. Young or unmarried women wear a *Lohonga*, along with a *Chadar* (upper body cover), but no *Urona*. Married women dress similarly, but they also include a *Urona* (veil). Queens wear *Riha* and *Mekhela-Chadar* without a *Chit Kapur* (veil), which is linked to *Lohonga*. Accessories include a three-piece *Jethi* or *Chitipti* on the head, necklaces, earrings, and various Assamese-style ornaments. Married women wear a red *Bindi*, while widows wear a white one (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026b). Men portraying female characters use artificial breasts and shells as part of their costumes



Figure 8

Jethi, Bena



Figure 9

Gejera

(pictures taken from the book *Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*)

2.3 Dress in the character of Sutradhar (Narrator)

The *Sutradhar* is the main character in Sattriya drama. He simultaneously serves as the audience, creates links between the characters, performs as a dancer, interprets situations, and directs the performance.

As lower garments, the *Sutradhar* wears a *White Ghuri* or *Lohonga*. The lower part of the *Lohonga* has a golden stripe/fabric border at least four inches wide. They wear long undergarments extending to the ankles beneath the *Lohonga*. They wear white robes as their outer garments, that is, a *Ga-Sula* and *Ga-Chadar* over the shoulders (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026a). This chadar is folded in half and shaped towards the back, flowing forward over the shoulders. At the end of the chadar, at the lower part, *Dohi* are attached. As a waistband for the *Sutradhar*, a *Tongali* is woven with red thread designs with *Dohi* below it. The lower part of the *Tongali* is covered with broad flower designs. They use the *Koshapatiya Pag* (turban) as their headgear, accompanied by a white *Urona* (veil) placed under the turban without covering the ears.

They wear a raised Tilak on their foreheads (Urdhapunda), Unti in their ears, Gamkharu in their hands, and Motamani around their necks as ornaments.



Figure 10



Figure 11

Gamkharu (Museum of Uttar Kamalabari Satra)
Sutradhar)

Unti (earrings of the



Figure 12

Turban of the Sutradhar

(pictures taken from the book *Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*)

2.3 Angarachana Makeup

The primary colours used for the Sattriya drama are red, blue, yellow and black. The ingredients used are *Hengul*, *Haital* and *Kajal* or *black soft Engar* (charcoal), *Barhamthuri*. The base of the white colour is the *Dholmati* (clay). Several colours are prepared by mixing these pigments. Glues that have been secreted from available ingredients, such as Wood Apple glue, tamarind seed glue and in some cases, the slimy and sticky substance of the elephant apple, are also used. They also mixed jaggery to wrap the paints. For black colour, dried gourd peel is burnt and soaked in water for two days to get the perfect pigment. When soft powder was mixed with glue to prepare black dye. They sprinkled sand powder on their faces to make them shine or highlight the makeup. After being fully composed, the actors become theatrical characters. The real man becomes a fictional character in the play. The colours of the various characters used in traditional Sattriya dramas are as follows: *Gaur Varna* (fair tone) - *the gods & women, Kshatriyas, heroes, Kshatriya teachers* like *Bhishma-Drona, Narada, prince, sages, kings, Hanuman, Rakshasa kula Vibhishan*. *Shyam Varna* (dusky tone)- *Krishna, Arjuna, Kamadeva, Satyaki, Rama, Bharata, Varuna, Shishupal, Parashurama, Naag, Lava-Kush*. *Kola Varna* (Black) - *Jarasandha, Yama, Asura-Davan, Keechak, Yaksha, Chandala*. *Peeta Varna* (Yellow) - *Bhim, Shakuni, Gandhari, Indra, Brahma*. *Shwet Varna* (White)- *Balobhadra, Brahmins and Brahminis, small kingdom kings, old men*

and women, the concubines of the princess, Shiv and the Wives of Naag. (Dark Pink) - Rukmavir. Bakta-karna, Agni, Vishvamisra. After finishing painting the characters' faces, the *khanikar* (makeup artist) put artificial beards on their faces (to the required characters are given moustaches and beards). They made beards from the torn hair of females and the fur of animals.



Haital



hengu



Barhamthuri



Dholmati

(Source collected from the manuscript artist Mridu Mausam Bora)

Sattriya drama is a distinctive theatrical performance with its own qualities. The artists wear costumes and ornaments made from indigenous quality jute, velvet and cotton fabrics. The costumes of Sattriya drama include *urdhvasa*, *adhvasa*, waistbands, headgear, ornaments, hairstyles and *tilak*.

3. The Aharya mentioned in Kirtan and Bargeet:

3.1 Kirtan

This work was written at different times in Kamarupa. Sankaradeva's *Kirtan* comprises numerous sections, each depicting a story or other subject matter. Within these sections, there are numerous *Ghoshas*. Among the nine forms of *Bhakti* (devotion), *Shravana* (listening) and *Kirtana* (chanting) are given special importance. The sections of *Kirtan* were scattered at different places. Sankaradeva gave the responsibility for organising these sections to Madhavadeva. Later, Madhavadeva's cousin Ram Charan Thakur collected the various sections of *Kirtan*, which were lying scattered in many places.

3.1.1 Description of Costumes in Kirtan:

The first section of the *Kirtan* is *Chaturvinsati Avatara Varnana* (twenty-four incarnations). In this section, Narayana's twenty-four incarnations have been described. There is no special mention of Aharya in this section. Only when Vishnu incarnated as *Narada Muni*, it is mentioned that he wanders around playing a veena named *Pancharatra* and chanting the name of Hari. (Pg-8)

Again, during the incident where the *Graha* (crocodile) attacks the *Gajendra* (king-elephant), it is described that after slaying the crocodile and rescuing *Gajendra* by Vishnu, *Gajendra* assumes the form of a courtier with a garland around his neck and four weapons in his hands & incarnates into Parishad, moves towards *Vaikuntha*. When Narayana incarnates into *Hayagriva* (half horse and half Human), his body is described as bright and radiant like molten gold.

In *Kirtan*, the larger number of references related to Aharya are found in the Dhyana Varnana section. In this section, Vishnu Mandir and the appearance of Vishnu are beautifully narrated. In *Kalyavan Vadha*, *Muchukandi Stuti*, *Bipraputra Anayana*, *Leelamala*, *Arjun aru Juddhisthiror Sambad*, *Ajamilopakhya*, the Krishna's appearance and costumes are narrated in these verses. As mentioned in *Kirtan*, the appearance of Vishnu or Krishna is characterised by a dark complexion. Vishnu is adorned in a *Peeto dhoti* (yellow garments studded with precious jewels), a gem-studded necklace around the waist, a golden *Ghunguru*, a *Golpota* around the neck, a *Satsari*, a *Monimala* (pearl-studded chain), a *Pechandar*, a *Koushtoobhmoni*, a *Banamala*, along with a Lotus flower garland.



Figure 17

Pechandar, Monimala

(*Bhaona aru Sattriya Nrityar Aharya*) (Museum of Uttar Kamalabari Satra)

Four-armed Vishnu has a *Sankha* (conch shell), *Chakra*, *Koumodi Gada* and *Padma* (lotus) in his hands, along with gem-encrusted *Keyur* (bangles), and *Kankana* (bracelet) worn on the wrist. *Makar Kundala* (a mythical sea creature resembling a fish or crocodile) on the ears, gem and pearl engraved *Noopur* on the feet, jewel embellished crown on the head and *Churamoni*, dazzling *Tilak* on the forehead, gem engraved *Mekhela* (dhoti) around the hip, and *Navaguna jukta Uttari* cloth on the body; all these details are mentioned. There are symbols of *Ankush* (a hook for driving an elephant), *Dhwaja* (flag), *Vajra* (weapon of Indra), *Java* (berley) and *Padma* (lotus) on the soles of the feet.

Figure 18

Noopur



Chitra Bhagavat of 1539AD collected by Hari Narayan Dutta Baruah

Vasudeva and Devaki prayed to lord Vishnu, who appeared before them in his Chaturbhuja (four-armed) form.

(1) *Ankush, Padma, Dhwaja, Bajra Jva /*

Dekhi chihna taate mile utsava //

(Ghosha no 12, Dhyana Varnana)

(2) Hiroto Rotnoro Kiriti karnata

Makara Kundala dule /

Chariru anaju lambito padmaro

Mala hubhe kore gole //

(Ghosha no 6, Ajamilopakhya)

(3) Kundala korne kore jalamala /

Kiriti ratnara hire ujjala //

Noopuro ronje padopadma kukho /

Jako dekhi mile mone hontukhe //

(Ghosha no 222, Arjun- Judhisthiror Samvad)

(4) Shyama tanu tate peeto bokhono /

Bijuli ronje jeno ghone ghono //

Koti tote Kanchi rotnoro Jwala /

Apadolombi gole bonomala //

(Ghosha no 79, Leelamala)

In the *Dhyana Varnana* section, Vaikuntha is described, where blue gems, diamonds, yellow gems, Panna, and well-equipped colour-precious gems are arranged in rows. In the middle of Vaikuntha, there is a tall temple made of jewels. The door is made of blue gem sapphires, the gold chain has been engraved, and exquisite gems (mukuta) have been engraved on the beams. Ruby stone gems were embellished. And various types of canopies (*chandratap*) were being hung, and in many places, pearls and jewels were hung.

The gem-studded throne of the temple is adorned by Narayana, enhancing its grandeur. The *Kirtan* mentions that the members of the *Vaikuntha* are offering their service by holding a pearl-decorated umbrella over Narayana.

Padmarag rotne logaila chouti /

Kouti Surjyo jeno grihoro jyoti //

Bichitro chanratap ase tani /

Arila murari mukuta moni //

(Ghosha no 6, Dhyana Vrnana)

In the *Haramohona* section, Vishnu's jewel-studded temple, as well as *Shiva's* matted hair, snake and garland of skulls, and ash-smeared body are mentioned. Costumes are being described in Vishnu's Mohini form.

In the *Shishu Leela* section, the first two verses mention Krishna as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. In verses 43 and 44, *Yashoda's* costume and appearance are described. In verse 97, the four crowns worn by the *four-headed Brahma* are mentioned.

In some verses of the *Rasa Kriya* section, Sankaradeva mentions the *Kundala* (earrings), *Noopur* (anklets), pearl necklaces around the neck and wrists, *Mekhela* (waist cloth), flowers in the hair, bun, loose hair, and chadar, describing the *Gopis'* appearance, along with depictions of Krishna's beauty in some verses. It is also mentioned that Krishna wears a garland of *Tulsi*. In the section of *Gopi Uddava sambad* in verses 9 and 10, the description of *Uddhava's* appearance and attire is found. The costumes of Krishna and *Uddhava* are almost identical.

In *Kirtan's Uresha Varnana* section, King *Indradumnya's* soldiers are mentioned as using arms and weapons. In this section, the colours of *Boloram*, *Subhdra* and *Krishna*, as well as different types of cloths and ornaments used when making the idol, are discussed.

In the *Brahma Mohana* section of the Kirtan, there is a mention of the four crowns on the four heads of *Lord Brahma*. In the *Chitra Bhagavat*, the illustration corresponding to the *Brahma Mohana* section also depicts this scene.

Brahma's four heads
with four crowns



Figure 20

(Chitra Bhagavat of 1539 AD, collected by Hari Narayan Dutta Baruah)

3.2 BARGEET

The Bargeets are expressions of spiritual thoughts and emotions. Only through the elevation of spiritual education can a society become well-organised. With this objective, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva composed the Bargeets to spread the message of the *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma* among the people in Assam.

According to the *Charit Puthi*, while travelling to the sacred pilgrimage site of *Badrikashram* in the Himalayas, Sankaradeva composed his first *Bargeet* - “*Mana meri Rama charanahi lagu*” - in front of the idol of Badri Narayan. It is mentioned in the *Charit Puthi* that Sankaradeva composed 240 Bargeets. However, after a fire broke out at *Kamala Ata*’s house, 4 Bargeets were recovered.

3.2.1 Description of Costumes in Bargeet

While studying the information related to Aharya (costume and ornaments) used in Sattriya drama, it is found that only seven of Sankaradeva’s *Bargeets* contain references to it. These *Bargeets* mainly describe the form and appearance of Lord Krishna. In these songs, the attire of Vishnu or Krishna is defined similarly. However, in a few *Bargeets*, some other Aharya elements are also mentioned — such as the *Gajamoti* (elephant pearl) or *Gaja Mukuta*, *Taditamvara* (a garment shining like lightning /sparkling cloth), *Kadamba mala* (garland made of Kadamba flowers), *Hirata Shikhondoko* (a peacock feather worn on the head), *Peeto dhoti* (yellow silk cloth worn by Krishna), *Hemharu* (gold necklace).

1) *Makar kundolo mondito gondo*

Gole gojomoit lule /

Taditamvara shyamo hundoro

Hire hikhondoko dule //

(*Bargeet no 20, Srimanta Sankardev bakyamrita, page no 961*)

2) *Gupo hikhu honge chole hire hikhondoko dule*

Korne kundolo gondo lule /

Keyuro konkono kore ure bonomala lule

Mugudho madhupo madhu bhule //

(Bargeet no 24, Srimanta Sankardev bakyamrita, page no 962)

3) *Neeto tanu peetopoto dhoti loti luro*

Nawa ghono ghono joise bijuli ugoro /

Noopur *(Bargeet no 25, Srimanta Sankardev bakyamrita, page no 962)*

4) *Charane monjoree jhure ure hemoharu*

Sankoro koho ohi hariko biharu /

(Bargeet no 25, Srimanta Sankardev bakyamrita, page no 962)



Figure 21

Conclusion

Sattriya drama has its own unique style of presentation. Therefore, it also possesses distinctive characteristics in terms of costumes and appearance. The main objective of this paper was to study the appearance and attire of the characters mentioned in the *Kirtans and Bargeets*,

composed by Sankaradeva. This research paper reveals that the forms and costumes of Vishnu and Krishna mentioned in the *Kirtan and Bargeets*, are largely the same. Only a few verses in the *Bargeets* describe their ornamentation separately. However, the *Bargeets* composed by Sankaradeva mainly describe only the divine forms of Vishnu and Krishna, with no reference to the attire or characteristics of other figures. This research highlights the importance of costume and appearance in Sattriya drama, contributing to the accurate portrayal of characters within the traditional dramatic framework. There is scope for further analysis through additional field studies, as well as through the study of regional diversity and the costume usage in theatrical performances.

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