

THE SETTING OF
THE BHAGAVAD GITA
(MAHABHARATA: WHAT LED TO
THE BATTLE OF KURUKSHETRA)

(Introduction: Part II -- of
the *Bhagavad-Gita of Inner Courage*
by Prof. Kev Nair)

PROF. KEV NAIR



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(Introduction: Part II -- of the *Bhagavad-Gita
of Inner Courage* by Prof. Kev Nair. The part
titled "What led to the Battle of Kuruskhetra")

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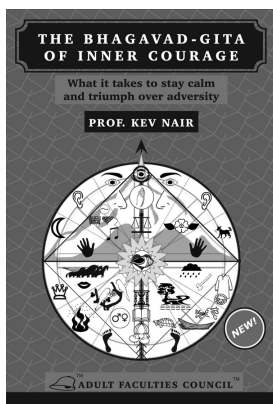
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About Prof. Kev Nair

Prof. Kev Nair was born in Kerala, South India, in 1949.

He’s an eminent scholar of international repute. He’s a *first class* LL.B. and a *first class* LL.M. And he was ranked **first** in university in *both* the LL. B. and LL. M. exams.

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Prof. Nair lives with his wife and children in Kochi, Kerala, an enchanting place on the earth.

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WHAT LED TO THE BATTLE OF KURUKSHETRA?

The kingdom of Bharata was an ancient kingdom in northern India. Hastinapura³ was the capital of that kingdom. The royal family in the city of Hastinapura had two branches: The Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas. The Pandavas were the five sons of King Pandu, and the Kauravas were the 100 sons of Pandu's half-brother Dhritarashtra.

Dhritarashtra and Pandu

Dhritarashtra and Pandu were formally⁴ the sons of the widows Ambika and Ambalika respectively of King Vichitravirya, a distant descendent of King Kuru (who was a descendent of King Bharata). And so the sons of Dhritarashtra as well as the sons Pandu were Kurus, descendents of Kuru. But in time, the term Kauravas (which is another word for Kurus) came to be applied almost exclusively to the sons of Dhritarashtra.

Pandu made King

Dhritarashtra was older than Pandu. But when their father King Vichitravirya died, Pandu (and not Dhritarashtra) was crowned the King. This was because Dhritarashtra had been blind from birth and so was not qualified to inherit the throne.

The affairs of state were looked after by Bhishma, the eldest

³ About 100 kilometres northeast of the present-day Delhi.

⁴ Sage Vyasa, Vichitravirya's mother's son by sage Parasara, was their real father.

of the Kurus. He was the uncle of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. He was a great warrior and a highly revered figure. When he was young, he had taken a vow of celibacy, which he kept till he died, and had renounced his right to become the king of the Kurus.

King Pandu did not rule the kingdom for very long. But during the short period that he did rule the kingdom, he proved himself to be a brave fighter and a just king. Some months after he had become King, and after a successful military exploit, he went into retreat in the forest along with his two wives, Kunti and Madri, for rest and relaxation. But one day while hunting in the forest, he happened to kill a deer that was mating. It turned out that the deer was not an animal at all, but a sage who had assumed the form of a deer. Immediately before dying, the sage had pronounced a curse on Pandu: He would die instantly, if he ever touched a woman to have sex with her. This meant that he could never have children. This realization made Pandu decide not to rule the kingdom directly any longer. So he authorized Dhritarashtra to start ruling the kingdom in his place and went away with his wives to the Himalayas and lived there in one of the valleys.

Pandavas and Kauravas are born

But while living there, Pandu's wives had five sons – not by Pandu, but by five gods – as desired by Pandu: The three elder sons, *Yudhishtirah*, *Bhima* and *Arjuna*, had Kunti for their mother. The two younger sons, *Nakula* and *Sahadeva* – twins – had Madri for their mother. Thus Pandu became the formal father of five sons. Their real fathers were these gods: Dharma, the god of righteousness, was the father of Yudhishtirah; Vayu, the god of the wind, was the father of Bhima; Indra, the king of the heavens and the god of war and storms, was the father of Arjuna; Asvins, the twin heavenly horsemen and gods of dawn, were the fathers of Nakula and Sahadeva. So all the five sons of Pandu were of

divine birth.

Immediately after Pandu's eldest son Yudhishtirah was born, Dhritarashtra also had children. But while Pandu had only five sons, Dhritarashtra had as many as 100 sons and a daughter, who was the youngest. And while Pandu's children were children of divine birth, the way in which Dhritarashtra's children were born indicated that they were children of demonic birth.

Pandu dies, and Dhritarashtra becomes *de facto* King

Years passed. And one day, while living in a forest in the Himalayan valley, King Pandu acted against the curse the deer-sage had pronounced on him and tried to have sex with his wife Madri. He died instantly. Madri, the mother of the twins Nakula and Sahadeva threw herself on to Pandu's funeral pyre and ended her life. Now Kunti was left alone with the five Pandava boys. And so she left the forest and moved to the palace in Hastinapura along with them.

At that time, Pandu's eldest son Yudhishtirah was still a boy and was not old enough to be made King. So from the time Pandu died, Dhritarashtra continued to rule the kingdom as the *de facto* King.

Pandavas and Kauravas are brought up together

King Dhritarashtra became guardian for the five Pandava princes ("Pandavas" for short). And Dhritarashtra and Bhishma (the uncle of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, and the oldest of the Kurus), lovingly brought them up in the palace in Hastinapura together with the one hundred Kaurava princes ("Kauravas" for short). And in the palace, Pandavas and the Kauravas were educated together under the supervision of Bhishma, the oldest of the Kurus.

Bhishma engaged two Brahmins⁵, Drona and Kripa, to train the Pandavas and Kauravas in the use of weapons, the art of war and all related skills. Though these trainers belonged to the priestly class, and not to the warrior class, they were great warriors with skills that were unmatched.

When they grew up, Pandava princes became men of great moral character, while almost all the Kaurava princes became evil-minded ones. Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, and Dussasana, his younger brother, were the worst of the lot.

From the time they were children, the Pandavas were widely seen as the heirs to the throne. They were full of piety. They had superior skills. Their heroic virtues were greater. They had greater success in battles and military exploits. And what is more, they were far more popular among the citizens. So the Kauravas were fiercely jealous of them.

Duryodhana hates Pandavas

From childhood on, there was a bitter personal rivalry between Duryodhana and Bhima, the second of the Pandavas. One reason was that Bhima was stronger than all the Kauravas, and so Duryodhana envied him. In fact, Bhima became the strongest – and the biggest – warrior alive. (His body was incredibly large in size). Another reason was that Bhima was a bit of a bully, and he used to take delight in threatening and hurting Duryodhana and his brothers – though they were not as strong as him, and were smaller.

⁵ Members of the priestly class, the highest Hindu caste. The Hindu society is traditionally divided into four hereditary classes (= varnas): Brahmins (priestly class), Kshatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaisya (merchant-and-farmer class) and Sudra (worker class). The Brahmin class is the highest class, and the Sudra class, the lowest. Those who are outside these four classes used to be treated as untouchables. But in modern India, things are quite different. Class differences, along these lines, have disappeared to a large extent – and they continue to disappear steadily.

And Duryodhana envied and hated Arjuna, too, the third of the Pandavas – because Arjuna was a far more skillful archer than any of the Kauravas. In fact, Arjuna became known as the most skilful of archers.

Duryodhana’s ambition to become King

There was yet another reason for Duryodhana’s hatred for the Pandavas.

Duryodhana had dreams of succeeding to the throne, though he knew that Yudhishthirah, the eldest of the Pandavas, had a better right. King Dhritarashtra had named Yudhishthirah as the one to succeed him, and so everyone looked on Yudhishthirah as the crown prince. Yudhishthirah was older than Duryodhana. And Yudhishthirah was a model of virtue and the embodiment of manliness.

Karna

Now, Pandavas had a half-brother, older even than Yudhishthirah, but nobody – except Kunti – knew about this.

Kunti, the mother of the three older Pandava brothers, had given birth to a son when she was just a child and before she had got married to Pandu. His name was Karna, and his father was the sun god. Circumstances had forced Kunti to abandon him immediately after his birth. She had floated him down a river in a basket. A humble charioteer⁶ who was a *suta* (a non-kshatriya, and one from a lower social class) had picked him up from the river and had brought him up as his own son. When he grew up, Karna became a formidable fighter and as great an archer as Arjuna himself. Karna did not know that he was Kunti’s son, but was under the impression that he was the son of the charioteer.

⁶ He was not a chariot warrior or a charioteer who drives a chariot on a battlefield, but one who drives a chariot-like conveyance to take his master from place to place.

Duryodhana and Karna become friends

One day, after the Pandavas and Kauravas had completed their training under Drona and Kripa, there was a public exhibition of their skills in Hastinapura. By then, they had all grown up and had become full-grown warriors. Karna appeared at this exhibition – uninvited – and mounted a serious challenge. He said he could outsmart Arjuna. And with Drona’s permission, he demonstrated that he had all the skills that Arjuna had. This delighted Duryodhana, because he could immediately see in Karna someone who might even be a greater fighter than Arjuna, and so a potential ally against the Pandavas. And he immediately struck up a warm friendship with Karna.

But Karna’s intrusion into the exhibition enraged Arjuna, and the other Pandavas. There was a heated exchange between Arjuna and Karna, and the two faced each other for a single combat. But then it came out that Karna was – apparently – not the son of a King at all, and so was not eligible to fight with Arjuna, the son of a King. Kunti could easily make out, from the royal stands, that Karna was her son, and so as much the son of a King – King Pandu – as Arjuna himself was. But she could not bring herself to reveal the truth at this stage. She was thrilled to see Karna again, but was horrified and crushed by the thought of one of her sons fighting with another.

Duryodhana supported Karna strongly and even made Karna the king of a principality, Anga, on the spot to overcome the question of rank. (He had the authority to do this). But bitter arguments and counter-arguments went on, and the sun was about to set, and so the combat had to be called off. Duryodhana made the most of the situation, and took Karna along with him. Thus, though Karna could not fight with Arjuna at the exhibition, he and Duryodhana became close friends. And from then on, Karna became the most powerful ally of Duryodhana – a life-long ally – and an unwitting enemy of the Pandavas.

Duryodhana schemes to kill the Pandavas

Day by day, the rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas deepened. Duryodhana became more and more afraid that the throne might go to Yudhishtirah, and not to him, if the Pandavas remained alive. And aided and abetted by Karna and Sakuni, an evil-minded maternal uncle, Duryodhana hatched plot after plot to kill off the Pandavas and to make sure that he would be the one to succeed Dhritarashtra. At first, King Dhritarashtra was against Duryodhana's schemes. But he was so attached to his son that, finally, he too came to help Duryodhana in these plots, though not wholeheartedly.

The Pandavas and their mother Kunti survived all these plots, though they had to face danger after danger and endure an immense amount of suffering.

The wax palace plot

Once Duryodhana and his supporters even went to the extent of getting a palace built of wax, straw and other materials that would catch fire and burn easily in a nearby city, Varanavata, where a great festival was going to take place; and they manipulated the Pandavas and their mother into staying in that palace to take part in the festival.

Duryodhana's plan was to torch that palace and to kill the Pandavas and their mother while they were asleep. But the Pandavas came to know of the plot in time through Vidura, a good-hearted younger brother of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. At midnight, they escaped through a tunnel (dug by Vidura's men) – after setting fire to the palace themselves. Dhritarashtra and his sons thought that the Pandavas and their mother had died in the fire, and they performed funeral ceremonies and pretended to be grieving for them.

Arjuna weds Draupadi

After escaping from the wax palace, the Pandavas and their mother lived in hiding in the forest for some time, and later, they moved to a city called Ekachakra and lived there, disguised as Brahmins.

While still living disguised as Brahmins, the Pandavas and their mother came to Panchala, the kingdom of King Drupada. There, in a tournament, Arjuna (in disguise) won an incredibly difficult test of archery skill and thus defeated all other competitors and won, princess Draupadi, King Drupada's daughter, as his wife. Soon Draupadi became the common wife of all the five Pandavas.

Karna had come to take part in the tournament, but he was not accepted as a competitor, because he was considered as a non-kshatriya, that too, one from a lower social class. Draupadi herself was against accepting him as a competitor on the grounds of his birth. This was a blow to Karna's pride. Duryodhana offered to help Karna get over the technical difficulty, but Karna did not want to marry a girl who did not want him. This incident brought Karna still closer to Duryodhana, because Duryodhana had never discriminated against him on grounds of birth.

Krishna, the cousin of the Pandavas

As far as the Pandavas were concerned, the tournament turned out to be momentous.

Apart from the opportunity of getting King Drupada on their side through the marriage, they had the good fortune to meet at the tournament someone who would soon become their all-powerful ally. That was their cousin Krishna, the nephew of Kunti⁷, the mother of the three elder Pandava brothers. Though Krishna was, to all appearances, the ruler of a neighbouring principality,

⁷ Kunti's father, King Sura, was Krishna's father's (Vasudeva's) father, too.

Dwaraka, he was actually the incarnation (*avatar*) of the God Vishnu⁸ on the earth.

Yudhishtirah made King of one part of the Kingdom

Soon the news reached Hastinapura that the archer who had won the tournament at Panchala was none other than Arjuna and that the Pandavas were alive. Many people, who had been horrified by Duryodhana's plots to kill the Pandavas, were happy at the news. Among them were Bhishma, Drona (the teacher of warfare) and Vidura, the younger brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu who had helped the Pandavas and their mother escape from the wax palace. They advised Dhritarashtra to invite the Pandavas back to Hastinapura and to let them rule half the kingdom. Dhritarashtra, who was not really a wicked person, listened to reason. And in spite of the stiff opposition from Duryodhana and Karna, Dhritarashtra got the Pandavas and their mother back to the palace (in Hastinapura) gave them a warm welcome.

Soon the kingdom was divided in half. One half, the fertile and wealthy half, remained with the Kauravas and the other half, made up of barren land, was given to the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra continued being the king of the half that remained with the Kauravas, and Hastinapura continued to be his capital. Yudhishtirah was made King of the half given to the Pandavas.

⁸ Vishnu is the preserver god in Hinduism – the god that pervades, preserves and sustains the universe between its creation and dissolution. Vishnu is a Sanskrit word, and its literal meaning is 'the one who works everywhere'. He forms a triad with Brahma, the creator god, and Shiva, the destroyer god. Krishna was the eighth earthly incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu. Here are all the ten incarnations of Vishnu: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Parasurama (Rama with the axe), Rama (Rama of the Ramayana), Krishna, Buddha, Kalki. This final incarnation, Kalki, would appear only by the end of this age and would be an apocalyptic judge – a man mounted on a white horse. He would punish the wicked and reward the good.

The Pandavas built a grand capital city – Indraprasta⁹ – in their new kingdom. They built in this city a magnificent palace, luxurious mansions, roads, gardens, parks, fountains, squares and everything that a great city needed. King Yudhishtirah, the eldest of the Pandavas, ruled his kingdom justly for 36 years from this capital city. During this period, the Pandavas transformed the kingdom from being a barren land into a fertile and prosperous area where agriculture, trade and commerce thrived.

The first game of dice

All this made Duryodhana all the more jealous of the Pandavas. Duryodhana could never reconcile himself to Dhritarashtra's decision to give half of the kingdom to the Pandavas. He wanted to take it back by force. But his uncle Sakuni – an evil-minded, cunning character who enjoyed plotting against others – made another suggestion. He knew that King Yudhishtirah had an uncontrollable weakness for the dice game. So he suggested to Duryodhana that, instead of going to war, he should manipulate Yudhishtirah into playing a dice game in which he, Sakuni, would play for the Kauravas. Sakuni was a crooked dice player – downright crooked – and he knew all the dishonest tricks needed to cheat anyone at this game.

Yudhishtirah could not refuse the invitation, because it was against the code of the kshatriyas not to accept such an invitation.

At the dice game, held in Hastinapura, Yudhishtirah lost game after game. And he lost to the Kauravas his kingdom and everything the Pandavas had. He then offered as stakes his brothers and himself and even his wife Draupadi (who was the wife of the other four Pandavas, too) and continued playing. Yudhishtirah lost all these stakes, too. And all the Pandavas and their common wife became Duryodhana's slaves.

⁹ The present-day Delhi is said to be where Indraprasta was.

Once the Pandavas became Duryodhana's slaves, Dussasana, Duryodhana's younger brother, humiliated them by stripping them naked in the hall of games. Dussasana even attempted to strip Draupadi, the Pandavas' common wife, before everyone. At that time, Krishna was not physically present in the hall. He was in a faraway place. But Draupadi silently prayed to him for help, and Krishna used his divine powers and made it impossible for Dussasana to succeed. For each length of cloth that Dussasana pulled off, an equal length appeared from nowhere and covered Draupadi's body. No matter how hard and how long he tried, Dussasana found it impossible to strip Draupadi naked. Finally, Dussasana became utterly exhausted and had no energy left, and had to give up his attempt.

The second game of dice

All this troubled King Dhritarashtra's conscience, and he became afraid of divine retribution. So he interfered at this stage and gave back to the Pandavas their freedom, kingdom and everything else they had lost.

This enraged Duryodhana. He started plotting again and finally managed to persuade King Dhritarashtra into letting him invite King Yudhishtirah to another game of dice. This time, there was to be only a single throw of dice. Yudhishtirah fell into the trap once again. And once again, Yudhishtirah lost the game.

Pandavas had to go into exile

To abide by the terms of the game this time, the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi (but *not* their mother Kunti) had to go into exile. The terms required them to remain in exile for thirteen years. And they had to spend the thirteenth year in concealment,

and nobody should happen to recognize them as the Pandavas during that year. If anybody were to recognize them during that last year of the exile, the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi would have to remain in exile for twelve more years. Till the time they successfully came out of the exile, Yudhishtirah's kingdom would remain with Duryodhana.

Kings friendly to the Pandavas came and offered their support. But Yudhishtirah knew that his duty for the time being was to abide by the terms of the game and so asked them to wait till he returned from the thirteen-year exile.

The Pandavas and their wife Draupadi lived in exile for the next thirteen years. For them, it was a period filled with dangers and adventures.

Pandavas complete the period of exile successfully

During the thirteenth year, the Pandavas lived in hiding in a kingdom called Matsya, the kingdom of King Virata, as servants to the King.

The Kauravas got wind of this, and they attacked that kingdom to track the Pandavas down before the thirteenth year ended. But Arjuna, in disguise, defeated them, and the Kauravas did not recognize him as Arjuna till after the last moment of the last day of the thirteenth year.

Duryodhana refuses to hand back the Kingdom to the Pandavas

As they were successful in completing the thirteen-year period of exile exactly as per the terms they had agreed on, the Pandavas became automatically released from their obligations. They were now entitled to get back their kingdom. But Duryodhana took the stand that Arjuna was recognized before the last moment

of the thirteenth year and demanded that the Pandavas must go into exile for another period of twelve years.

The Pandavas knew that they did not have to go into exile again, and so stayed on as King Virata's guests in Matsya and started taking steps to get their kingdom back.

King Virata was grateful to the Pandavas for defending his kingdom against the attack made by the Kauravas. He was also proud of the fact that the Pandavas chose his palace for living in hiding during the last year of their exile. So he offered to marry his daughter Uttara to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.

A number of kings, rulers and princes who were the friends and relatives of the Pandavas came to attend the marriage and to welcome the Pandavas back from the exile. They pledged their support to the Pandavas. Pandavas' cousin Krishna, the ruler of Dwaraka, was the most important person among them. The Pandavas, Kauravas and others knew that he was not just the ruler of Dwaraka, but was actually the incarnation of the God Vishnu on the earth – though none of them knew about all his glories as the Lord of the Universe.

Preparations for war and efforts at negotiation

At Virata's palace, these friends and relatives of the Pandavas discussed how Yudhishtirah would be able to get his kingdom back from Duryodhana. These friends and relatives of the Pandavas felt certain that Yudhishtirah wouldn't be able to get the kingdom back from Duryodhana without a fight. So they decided to get ready for a battle. They decided to send messengers to various kingdoms and principalities to request them to join the Pandavas as allies in a possible war against the Kauravas. At the same time, they also decided to send King Virata's priest himself as an envoy to Duryodhana to see if the matter could be settled peacefully.

Both sides – the Pandavas as well as the Kauravas – started mobilizing armies. They vied with each other for the support of as many kings and armies as possible. In the end, practically the whole of northern India became enlisted as the allies of one of the two sides.

Arjuna opts for Krishna's presence with him as his charioteer; Duryodhana gets Krishna's army

For the Pandavas, Arjuna, and for the Kauravas, Duryodhana, formally approached Krishna, too, and sought his support for their side. Krishna offered them a choice: One side could have him, while the other side could have all his weapons and all his army. But if he was chosen, he would come to the battlefield unarmed, and would not actually fight in the battle, whichever be the side that chose him.

Arjuna readily chose Krishna, and Krishna agreed to act as Arjuna's charioteer in the war. Thus Duryodhana was able to get Krishna's army, and he was utterly thrilled.

Efforts at negotiation fail

The envoy sent by the Pandavas visited Dhritarashtra's court. He told Dhritarashtra that the Pandavas wanted their kingdom back. He made it clear to them that, while the Pandavas preferred peace to war, they wouldn't hesitate to go to war for their kingdom, if it was not given back. But Karna vigorously defended Duryodhana's stand that Arjuna was recognized in the thirteenth year of exile – though at the last moment – and argued against the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra could not take a firm decision, and he sent the envoy back. The mission failed.

King Dhritarashtra then sent his minister Sanjaya to the Pandavas, and Sanjaya pleaded with Yudhishtirah to avoid a war

at all costs, even if the Pandavas had to give up their right to the kingdom and live on alms. Yudhishtirah stood his ground, and refused to yield. But at the same time, he wanted peace at all costs, and so offered to give up his demand for the kingdom if a mere village each was given to him and to his four brothers.

Sanjaya reported all this to the Kauravas. And Dhritarashtra advised Duryodhana to reach a compromise and to avoid the war. But nothing would budge Duryodhana. He was adamant. He wanted a war with the Pandavas at all costs.

But from the side of Pandavas, there was one more attempt at a compromise. King Yudhishtirah sent Krishna himself to meet the Kauravas and to urge them to settle the matter peacefully, but Duryodhana would not listen. Duryodhana made it clear to Krishna that he wouldn't give the Pandavas even as much as a pin-prick of land.

With this enemy, the only effective option is to fight

So Pandavas were left with no alternative but to fight for their kingdom.

The forces mobilized by both sides were colossal in size. And the Kaurava forces¹⁰ were larger in size than those of the Pandavas. The Kauravas had an army of as many as 2,40,570 chariots and an equal number of elephants (as against the 1,53,090 chariots and an equal number of elephants in the Pandava army), 7,21,710 cavalrymen (as against the 4,59,270 cavalrymen in the Pandava army), and more than 12,02,750 infantrymen (as against the 7,65,450 infantrymen in the Pandava army).

¹⁰ The Kaurava forces consisted of eleven akshauhinis (divisions), and the Pandava forces consisted of seven akshauhinis. An akshauhini used to be made up of 21, 870 chariots, an equal number of elephants, three times as many cavalrymen and five times as many infantrymen.

The field fixed for the battle was the plain of Kurukshetra¹¹, a place less than 100 kilometres to the north of modern Delhi.

And so, on the morning of the day fixed for the battle, both the armies assembled at the battlefield in Kurukshetra.

This is the background to, and the setting of, the Gita.

* * *

¹¹ Kurukshetra is now a place of pilgrimage.

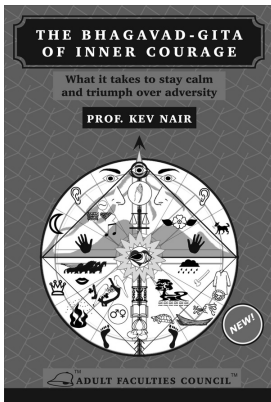
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