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Reimagining Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract:

The present research endeavour highlights the radical reimagining of Draupadi, a mythological figure, in Mahasweta Devi's ground-breaking short story "Draupadi." Devi, by shifting the tale from *Mahabharata* to a brutal landscape of the Naxalite movement, changes a figure of royal victimhood into Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal rebel. The paper utilizes Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern as theoretical framework. The argument here, however, shows how Dopdi's ultimate resistance – as she refuses to clothe her naked and raped body – shakes the state's disciplinary mechanisms. The state's endeavour to silence Dopdi by using gendered violence and her encounter with Senanayak represent "a speech act," which is beyond verbal language. Devi deconstructs the myth that a woman's honour depends on her body, and turns it into a terrifying weapon of defiance and resistance. Dopdi, by reclaiming her agency through her mutilated body, rises as a powerful symbol of subaltern insurrection, which shakes the very roots of patriarchal norms and state hegemony.

Keywords: Draupadi, Foucault, Spivak, power dynamics, resistance, tribal identity, gendered violence.

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Reimagining Draupadi, an important trope in contemporary Indian English Fiction, shifts Draupadi from the periphery of Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata* to the centre of her own narrative. Various creative writers usually put Draupadi's character to accentuate female agency, interiority and social justice. Chitra Banerjee Divyakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), Saraswati Nagpal's graphic novel *Draupadi: The Fire Born Princess* (2012), Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* (2013), *Bhima's Wife* (2013), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (English translation 2013), Trisha Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru* (2016), Vamshi Krishna's *Draupadi—India's First Daughter* (2017), Yarlagadda Laxmi Prasad's Telgu novel *Draupadi* (2017), Saiswaroopa Iyer's *Draupadi: The Tale of an Empress* (2019), Sonali Raje's *The Empress of Indraprastha: Building an Empire* (2020), Ira Mukhoty's *Songs of Draupadi* (2021), Koral Dasgupta's *Draupadi* (2022), and Shahiba Lall's *Draupadi: The Flame that Walked the Earth* (2023) have reimagined Draupadi displaying her contemporary relevance. Mahasweta Devi also pens a short story titled "Draupadi", which deconstructs the notion that a woman's prestige and honour depend on her body. Dopdi Mejhen, the central character of the story, shuts the mouth of the oppressing forces by using her naked and raped body as a sharp weapon.

According to Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, discipline refers to the practice that "produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138). In Devi's narrative, discipline appears in the form of attempts by the state machinery to regulate Dopdi's body through military means and violence. Biopower is described in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 as power's attempts to "take charge of life, operating to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (138). While discipline targets the individual, biopower works at the population level. Dopdi is identified as a subaltern figure in the story, representing one particular category into which her life was incorporated.

Surveillance is employed by the state in an effort to discipline the body and impose biopower. In particular, Foucault provides a detailed account of the mechanisms of power inherent in the panoptic construction: visibility is a trap because of the process of self-regulation that "subjects to knowledge, [which] induces confessing" and thus leads to self-disciplining (200). In "Draupadi," surveillance becomes apparent through the continuous pursuit of Dopdi, while Devi manages to avoid such an epistemic capture. The micro-physics of power stresses that it is exercised, rather than possessed and that it is spread throughout the network. From this perspective, the analysis goes beyond institutional power, examining it as a distributed practice involving various kinds of relationships and processes. It is important to consider that it implies both symbolic and physical violence, including sexual assault.

Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" introduces the famous claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" (104), which is based on the structural conditions under which the subaltern's experience is excluded from the discourse. However, in response to this claim, Spivak makes it explicit that "representation has not withered away" (70). Therefore, rather than considering the former as a rigid theoretical position, the paper treats it as a productive theoretical dilemma. Dopdi's final act of resistance – the stripping of clothes and confronting authority – does not constitute a straightforward case of subaltern recovery; it represents the disruption of the existing order which makes subalternity possible and subaltern voices inaudible. Despite the impossibility of hearing the subaltern voice in hegemonic epistemological constructions, one can engage in forms of resistance which undermine them. Dopdi's body turns out to be a means of subversion, challenging Spivak's theoretical position from the other side. Devi changes the traditional canvas of the *Mahabharata* to the scenario of the Naxalite movement. Draupadi, Pandavas' *patrani*, has to bear a lot of humiliation when she is disrobed by Dussasana at the hint of his brother Duryodhana. He drags her to the assembly during her menstruation period. Krishna supplies her endless fabric, which replaces

her agony, and makes her body a site of patriarchal protection. She becomes an object of domestic shame, which is defined by patriarchy. However, Devi brings a radical subaltern shift by translating this mythological figure into Dopdi, a Santhal tribal woman and revolutionary fugitive. She is shown in the story as an untouchable who hails from a lower stratum of society. The state seeks to hunt Dopdi for her role in a revolt which happened in the late 1960s in a tribal area.

Devi's story "Draupadi" raises many issues related to the question of resistance, subjection, and the notion of alterity. Instead of being viewed in isolation from each other, events in the text reveal mechanisms of regulation inherent to the regimes of power, thus turning into a means of exposing disciplinary power. In order to understand these mechanisms better, it might be useful to refer to the theory of "docile bodies" proposed by Michel Foucault. According to this concept, the state's use of violence against those who rebel is often motivated not only by the need to punish but also by the need to regulate. The state's inability to establish complete control over the insurgent bodies causes anxiety and demonstrates limitations of disciplinary power; in this way, the state apparatus is forced to face its vulnerability. Subsequently, the pursuit of Dopdi is marked by another mechanism employed by power—surveillance. Calling Dopdi's name and waiting for her to respond is a technique designed to impose the interpellation of this individual through the classification used by the regime of power. However, Dopdi's refusal to acknowledge such an interpellation becomes a crucial element of resistance because it means that the subaltern subject fails to accept herself as part of the state's classifying structure. This situation shows that it becomes impossible for the subject to adopt the role of surveilled individual because visibility does not necessarily imply obedience.

Simultaneously, Senanayak's strategy of surveillance demonstrates yet another facet of power—micro-physics. Namely, he relies on his ability to anticipate the movement and

actions of Dopdi, thus occupying her cognitive space. It indicates that the regime of power works not simply via the use of violence against the bodies of rebels but also via control of their thoughts and ideas. Dopdi gradually understands this fact; therefore, the narrative suggests that power works via complicated, non-linear relations rather than via a linear hierarchy of dominance-submission. One more issue that the discussion of surveillance touches on concerns Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Refusal to call her by name can be understood as a gesture of resistance performed by Dopdi in order to challenge the hegemony of power. Although this gesture can be interpreted as silence, it contradicts the claim of Spivak about impossibility of voice of the subaltern precisely because Dopdi's silence speaks of her resistance. Finally, anticipation of the encounter and the violence it entails foregrounds the importance of bodies for both power and resistance. Dopdi is aware of the violence she will have to suffer; however, she refuses to be submissive in the light of her awareness. On the contrary, her ululation while being captured becomes the most articulate statement of resistance in opposition to state surveillance. Thus, the narrative reveals itself as a means of showing the workings of power.

Dopdi reflects on what would happen to her if she were caught in a "counter," which is the phrase for the ruthless torture and murder of detainees held by the police in the guise of a fictitious encounter to get rid of serious offenders. Nevertheless, in the story's context, the term "encounter" takes on an ethical meaning—that is, meeting someone face-to-face. Prior to her imprisonment and before this "essential encounter," Dopdi foresees her terrible experience, "When they *kounter* you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. *Killed by police in an encounter...unknown male...age 22...*" (25). She recalls every detail of Operation Bakuli, including Surja Sahu's murder. The second part's extended thesis accommodates all of Dopdi's actions, including her unwavering walk down the road to the forest without turning around, her summary of Operation Bakuli,

her suspicion of the pursuer, and her recall of the warnings of other activists in the camp she is headed to. She recalls the important information she needs to provide the activists in the camp, and when she finally realizes her assailant is an enemy, she makes plans to murder him, but it's too late. When captured, she maintains her composure and obediently uses ululation to communicate her captivity to her allies who are concealed in the forest.

Devi decides to strip away the divine protection of the *Mahabharata* and replaces it with fierce physical agency. Herein lies Draupadi's reimagining. She drops Krishna in her story and compels her reader to face the bitter truth of custodial violence without any miracle that can soothe Dopdi, who transforms her disrobing into a weapon of political protest. The Senanayak, who represents the state, intends to act as a moment of shame, but he fails in his intention. Here the mythological *Vasraharan* is subverted with jarring intensity. After being gang-raped throughout the night, Dopdi is asked to dress and appear before the commander. She, like an undefeated soldier, decides not to clothe her body. The story reveals, "Dopdi stands before him, naked, Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Her two breasts, two wounds" (33). Her body is proof of the savagery done to her by the state and patriarchy. She completely rejects patriarchal shame by challenging the Senanayak and asks, "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (33). Dopdi walks towards her captors "with her head high", and emerges as goddess Kali's subaltern version. She does not wait for a Krishna, i.e, a male, to come and save her. She becomes such a force that even "the Senanayak is afraid to stand before" her (33). The absence of divine help in this reimagining cannot be taken as a failure of protection, but the birth of female agency.

A sort of political act can be noticed in the change of her name from Draupadi to Dopdi, which is a tribalized version. By doing so, she is declared an outsider to Indian high-culture tradition. Dopdi is projected not as a royal figure concerned with preserving her virtue, but as a rebel who struggles for the right of tribal communities to their land and a

dignified life. The change of name, the story reveals, is not only a phonetic casualty of the dialect, but also a deep linguistic shift which x-rays the sociopolitical divide between the subaltern and the state. The name Draupadi in *Mahabharata* is a vessel carrying patriarchal honour and royal lineage. Spivak believes that the name of the central character is "the tribalized form, Dopdi, … the proper name of the ancient Draupadi" (Preface 8). As Devi renames her, she pulls the male protection and ends up in a state of deprivation by showing her coming from the Santhal community. The name-change functions as a key tool of state power, allowing authority to classify, distort, and ultimately dominate the subaltern subject. The shift from "Draupadi" to "Dopdi" is not just a matter of pronunciation; it is a politically loaded act that strips the subject of linguistic and cultural legitimacy. For the police, "Dopdi" signals the supposed inadequacy of the tribal language, reinforcing the idea that only a "civilised," Sanskritised form carries authority. In this way, language becomes a hierarchy, with dominant forms positioned as legitimate and subaltern speech pushed to the margins. Through this renaming, Dopdi is drawn into what Michel Foucault describes as a carceral network of power, where systems of surveillance and documentation turn individuals into objects of knowledge. She is no longer treated as a full human being but as a record—a file to be tracked, categorized, and ultimately eliminated. The state's effort to standardize her name reflects a broader impulse to impose order on what it sees as disorder, much like colonial regimes which controlled indigenous populations through administrative and linguistic systems. In this sense, the state mirrors the colonizer, exercising epistemic violence through its bureaucratic structures.

At the same time, the state's view of "Dopdi" as a corrupted version of "Draupadi" parallels its understanding of tribal resistance as a distortion of political order. Both linguistic difference and political rebellion are framed as deviations which must be corrected or suppressed. However, this so-called "corruption" becomes a site of resistance. Rather than

signalling loss, the name "Dopdi" comes to represent something irreducible—an identity which refuses assimilation into dominant cultural and linguistic norms. Spivak's concept of the subaltern helps clarify this dynamic. Dopdi's misnaming shows how the subaltern is not only silenced but also misrepresented within dominant discourse, her identity filtered through the language of power. However, Devi complicates this by allowing Dopdi to inhabit and reshape that imposed identity. Her refusal to adopt the "correct" pronunciation becomes a deliberate act of evasion, resisting the state's mechanisms of surveillance and classification.

This tension is evident in the official record: "Dopdi Mejhan, 27, husband, Dulna Majhi (deceased), Domicile Chekrakhan…" (Devi 18). Here, her life is reduced to data points, illustrating the violence of bureaucratic abstraction. She becomes legible only within the state's system, stripped of subjectivity. However, Dopdi herself escapes this logic—remaining not just physically elusive but also resistant to being fully defined. The change from "Draupadi" to "Dopdi" also marks a break from the mythological Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. Unlike the epic figure, whose dignity is restored through divine and patriarchal intervention, Dopdi rejects narratives of rescue and victimhood. Her identity is grounded in the harsh realities of the marginalized world she inhabits. When her captors expect shame, she instead confronts them with defiance, transforming her violated body into a powerful statement of resistance.

In this light, Dopdi's dialect and "mispronounced" name become assertions of autonomy. She does not seek validation within the dominant linguistic order; instead, she embraces the imposed name and turns it into a form of resistance. "Dopdi" becomes a counter-discursive space that challenges authority and exposes its limits. Ultimately, the politics of name-change in *"Draupadi"* reveals how deeply language is tied to power and identity. While domination operates through both physical force and linguistic control, it is never absolute. Even within these constraints, the subaltern subject can resist, reinterpret, and

assert a presence that cannot be fully captured. Dopdi's name, rather than marking erasure, stands as a sign of survival, defiance, and enduring resistance.

Devi critiques a violent deconstruction of the scene of Draupadi's disrobing. The scene can be taken as a moral and dramatic axis of both Devi's story and the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi's body, in the epic, has been presented as a vessel of the Kuru dynasty's prestige and honour. She is gambled away by the Pandavas in the court, where her physical violation is perceived as a theological and legal crisis. She, for her protection, completely depends on a higher power. As her sari is pulled, Krishna supplies her infinite fabric. It is an act that saves her honour, and it simultaneously reinforces Draupadi's position as a patriarchal object. She needs a male saviour to uphold her social prestige and purity. Devi, contrarily, highlights the subaltern woman's predicament in the modern world, where the metaphysical shield of the *Mahabharata* is put off to show the tyrannical machinery of state violence. As Dopdi is apprehended, her *vastraharan* is not done in a court room, but in police custody, which is a systematic act of custodial rape. Devi's version offers no divine saviour and no endless sari. Instead, "she feels her arms and legs tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag had been removed. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many to make her" (31). By removing the miraculous intervention, Devi forces a confrontation with the vulnerability of the subaltern body. There is no Krishna because, in the political landscape of the Naxalite struggle, there is no moral universe that intervenes on behalf of the untouchable tribal woman.

Dopdi's raped body can be taken as a political text where the authority of the state is inscribed. Foucault is quite relevant when he says, "The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Discipline 25). Foucault's contention shows Dopdi's sufferings not as brutal excess but as modern

disciplinary violence, cold, strategic, and bureaucratic. He writes, “What was then being formed was a policy of coercion that acts upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” (138). Dopdi’s sexual violation is not personal, but administrative and political. Foucault rightly believes, “Sex is not something that one simply judges; it is something one administers. It is not dealt with as a matter of prohibition alone, but as something to be managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated …” (History 24).

Dopdi is, in Foucauldian terms, under surveillance and visibility. Her life is a hunted tribal subject, which is visible to the state and invisible as a citizen. “Visibility is a trap. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Discipline 200). Dopdi’s refusal to clothe her raped body is a strong resistance against power. Moreover, this resistance emerges from within power itself, not outside it. As Foucault states, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (History 95). Devi rewrites history from below, and allows a subaltern woman, Dopdi, to speak through bodily defiance rather than a sanctioned language. Her naked body shakes the state authority and patriarchal structures. It converts victimhood into a radical form of resistance. Draupadi here is reimagined not as a mythic sufferer but as a postcolonial political subject. Devi’s Draupadi exposes state violence, militarized power, control over tribal bodies, and silencing and surveillance. All this aligns completely with Foucault’s notion of power as diffused, disciplinary control, and the politicized body.

The narrative reaches its zenith by subverting the concept of shame entirely. In the epic, Draupadi’s honour is restored by being covered; in Devi’s story, Dopdi’s power is realized through her refusal to be covered. When the Senanayak orders her to be clothed and

brought to his tent, Dopdi "tears her piece of cloth with her teeth" and throws it away (Devi 37). Dopdi changes her gaze when she walks towards Senanayak without putting on her clothes. She does not act like a loser. Devi says, "her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi [Dopdi] wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation" (33). Usually, the state employs nakedness as a weapon to humiliate women, but this time it is itself humiliated as it loses its power to shame. Dopdi's laughter pierces like an arrow, which can be seen as a slap on the commander's face. It seems that the Senanayak is raped, not Dopdi. Here her wounds become her weapons. Unlike *Mahabharata*'s Draupadi, Devi does not send any male saviour to safeguard Dopdi's honour. Rather she herself emerges as a fighter who seems to declare, "I was ever a fighter, so one fight more, the best and the last!" (Browning). Browning's lines suit Dopdi very well as she finds indestructible agency in her torments.

Dopdi's physical form goes beyond the biological and becomes an intense political statement. The female tribal body, in this reimagining, does not merely serve as an incidental casualty of war but as a battleground where the state demonstrates its destructive force and the subaltern shows her protest and defiance. For the subaltern woman, the body is the chief point of contact with the state exploitation. The state takes her body as a terrain to be conquered, mapped and disciplined through violent means. Fanon avers in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> "… the naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and blood-stained knives which emanate from it. For, if the last shall be first, this can only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed the intention to place the last at the head of the things… can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence." (37)

Thus, Fanon believes that violence is a cleansing force in the process of decolonisation. In "Draupadi", the state's colonialism is challenged through violence. That is why the tribals have to take up arms against cruel landlords and the merciless state apparatus. It is the misconstruction of the oppressors that they will demolish a woman physically and psychologically through the police and the military by employing a strategy that seeks to use the female body as a tool. They, by gang-raping Dopdi, want to break the nerve of the Nexalite moment. It is their logic that if they succeed in destroying Dopdi's body, they will eradicate the insurgency. Devi reveals this savage instrumentalization when Dopdi is interrogated:

> Draupadi [Dopdi] Mehjan was apprehended at 6:53 PM. It took an hour to get her to camp. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas stool. At 8:57 Senanayak's dinner hour approached saying, Make her. *Do the needful*, he disappeared. (33)

Senanayak's use of the words "make her" is a euphemism for strategic custodial rape. The state endeavours to transform the body into an atlas of scars so that the other rebels can take these scars as a warning. Dopdi's wisdom, however, counters the manoeuvring of the state by refusing to accept the script of victimhood. She does not accept any type of sustenance—like water— offered by the rapists. The story reveals, "incredible thirst. In case she says, 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth" (31). When "[t]he guard pushes the water pot forward [,] Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground" (32). Dopdi's refusal is a total rejection of the state's mercy and its attempt to re-establish a paternalistic control over her. She does not permit the state to serve as a sustainer, as it has already used its power to destroy her. Thus, she takes her first step toward reclaiming herself through bodily autonomy, choosing to remain thirsty rather than partake of her enemy's water. This is how she punctures the intention of the state to see her as a broken subject.

Dopdi's defiance reaches its peak in the scene when she is produced before the commander. In the morning, when she is ordered to clean her body, she employs her wrecked body as a means of protest. Not only does she bear her wounds, she also weaponizes them. She dismantles the notion of violation itself. She "de-shames" herself when she snatches the political efficacy of the rape as a tool of insult. By pushing the Senanayak with her wounded breast, she asks a pertinent question, "Are you a man? (33). The state can destroy a woman's body, but not her invincible will. She, thus, spits on Senanayak's face by challenging his masculinity and the state's authority. Devi reimagines Dopdi as a manifestation of the Goddess Kali, who rolls her tongue and stands on Lord Shiva's chest. She is the dark-skinned goddess of destruction. She signifies a force that is liberating and terrifying. Devi, by invoking the imagery of terrible beauty, describes Dopdi as a dark, dreadful and gaunt woman, who mirrors Goddess Kali. She is reimagined as a modern subaltern incarnation of this Hindu icon. This is a deviation from the tormented woman of conventional literature. Generally, a woman who encounters such a terrible fate is supposed to be silenced. Dopdi, on the contrary, becomes a terrible vocal. The text says, "Draupadi [Dopdi] comes close [to Senanayak]. Stand with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search. Dopdi Majhen, you asked them to make me up, Don't you want to see how they made me?" (33). Dopdi's nakedness does not remain as a sign of vulnerability; however, it becomes a terrifying force which makes the armed commander "terribly afraid" (33). The traditional aesthetics related to a heroine is dismantled. Her beauty lies in her unyielding before the cruel authority, not in purity and symmetry. The Draupadi of modern age, in this reimagining, does not wait for any Krishna to help her, but she herself stands and faces the hard reality.

The intersectionality of caste and gender is quite apparent in this narrative. Dopdi's strife is unique, and she lives at the crossroads of two overlapping systems of oppression. She is projected as a tribal subaltern in a post-colonial state and a woman in a male chauvinist

society. Her body, unlike the classical Draupadi, is shown as a site of more visceral structural violence. The state not only sees her as a woman to be subordinated, but also as a racial entity. She is abused more as a tribal rebel. When the police gangs rape her, they endeavour to dominate both her gender and ethnicity. However, Dopdi's refusal to break signifies the failure of these dual systems of control. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak within the discourse of the oppressor; yet, in this story, Dopdi speaks through the silence of her defiance and the exposure of her wounds. Her struggle proves that for the subaltern woman, liberation cannot be found in traditional patriarchal structures—whether they are the laws of the state or the "protection" of male relatives—but must be forged in the fire of personal and collective autonomy. Senanayak, in the story, is not presented as the only source of power. Rather there may be multiple generators of power. A network of legal, military, and ideological power is apparent here to crush Dopdi. As Michel Foucault believes:

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. (Power 98)

Senanayak is, here, a Foucauldian panopticon villain, who studies tribal codes, controls them, and tries to destroy them. In moving beyond the epic, Devi makes her most radical point when she is not merely updating a myth, but actively dismantling it to provide a new blueprint for resistance.

Dopdi Mejhen proves that her vulnerability is not a weakness but a force that shakes the foundations of patriarchal and state power. By standing naked, she exposes the nakedness of the state's own brutality. As she thunders her challenge to the armed commander, she

shows that true agency is found when one no longer fears the loss of honour defined by men. Devi's Draupadi remains unarmed in the traditional sense, yet her scarred body becomes the most potent weapon in the Naxalite struggle. Ultimately, Devi reimagines the myth to show that when the subaltern woman embraces her scars and rejects the cloth of shame, she becomes an invincible entity which the structures of power can neither clothe, nor conquer, nor understand.

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