



Identity, Ethnicity and School Education: An Institutional Ethnography of schools in Assam

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The author in this article shows various identities and perceptions about how identity groups are formed through invisible and visible pedagogies in school. The context is set against the protracted conflict in BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Administrative District) in Assam. The article is based on institutional ethnography of 10 schools in the BTAD region of Assam. The respondents belong to three groups primarily Bodo, Assamese, Muslim teachers and students. Students-experiences school life through different progressive stages with each stage possessing different qualifications from pre-primary to secondary which comprises school education. It is structured in a way that higher the standard of education better life chances in the job market is provided. Clearly there are subjective elements in the grading of the children, but these are masked by the apparent objectivity of the grid, type of school, locality etc. These structured and sometimes unstructured elements reproduce and reinforce dominant ideologies as pitted against the 'Other' or 'Significant Others'. Herein the author have analyzed how school education in a multicultural setting reinforces ethnic identities/perceptions about identities among children by indicators like belief system, perception about 'self' 'other', citizen, plurality and find answers to the primary research question: "Does learning in school contribute in making identities about 'Self' and 'Others' rigid and aggressive or does they develop responsible identity of themselves which might allow room for others and respect diversity of thought and being? Both visible (textual) and invisible pedagogy has been looked at while making meaning of social science textbooks of secondary schooling in Assam and perception of the teachers and students in the 10 sampled schools.



Introduction

School is a social site and has an important social role to play in the making of a democratic society. A significant discourse on the ‘social question’ was the relationship between democracy and education, initiated by Dewey that emerged within the framework of the ‘Nation’ in the early twentieth century (Dewey 1916). The discourse continued and education came to be considered as a universal human right as mentioned in the UN Human Rights Declaration 1948. In India, it took almost more than a hundred years from beginning of twentieth century till 2009 to have universalization of elementary education despite leaving 0-6 years old and 14-18 years old children outside the legal entitlement.

Studies have affirmed that two forms of pedagogy co-exist in a school viz. visible and invisible (manifest and hidden curriculum) which is embedded in the subjective and apparent objectivity of the school pedagogy. Thus, the shift from the invisible to the visible pedagogies in one phrase is a change in code: a change in the principles of relation and evaluation; whether these are principles of knowledge, of social relationships, of property of identity (Halsey, et al, 1997). A child forms his or her identity sense of self, others and significant others in such a transition phase. History, values, identity of various groups, are produced and reproduced through textbooks and other forms of curriculum.

Education in the process becomes a mask which an educated person writes in public, to profess his preferences for scientific explanations for life’s big questions and to claim superiority over the ‘ignorant’ masses (Kumar, 1992). This aspect was also discussed in detail by Cesaire and Fanon when they said, “the idea of a Barbaric Negro is a European invention”. Adding to this Fanon further warned us about who are content with mimicking the colonial masters (Fanon, 1952). Education being alienated from the existential experience of the students (Freire, 1972) produces identities and compartmentalizes them according to the perceptual history of the colonizers. Thus, education especially school education is reduced to sonority of words rather than its transforming power (Freire, 1972, 47). In this context, it is important to explore perceptual identities, history which is produced through different forms of pedagogies in school.



In this context looking at textbook as a form of visible pedagogy and how it impact formation of identity especially in a conflict situation was particularly an interesting observation. Locating textbooks historically, it only became a common practice during the colonial period. As Kumar (1992, 25) writes the Sir Charles Woods Despatch of 1854 started the use of textbooks in establishing a new education system in India by the East India Company. The purpose was analyzed as under:

1. The new system would be governed by a bureaucracy at every stage from primary schooling onwards, and in all aspects including the structure of syllabi, the content of textbooks and teacher training.
2. Indigenous schools would have to conform to the syllabus and textbooks prescribed by the colonial government if they wanted to seek government aid.
3. Impersonal, centralized examinations would be used to assess student's eligibility for promotion and to select candidates for scholarships.

Similarly in Assam, prior to colonialism, indigenous schools in Assam satras (sankari schools), tols and pathsalas instructions were mainly of religious nature and teachers had the full autonomy to teach what they considered worth teaching. Western science and literature were the subjects British introduced in English language. The Missionaries on the other hand would translate the English textbooks to Assamese and teach in Assamese medium even before Assamese was made the official language in Assam (Barpujari, et al 2008). The students found difficulty in learning the language and the content was completely alien to their 'lived' experiences. Memorization without meaning making of the text thus became the only convenient way to pass impersonal exams. Both the knowledge prescribed and the language was not part of the ethos of the students. Education in post colonial India continued to carry the impersonalized nature of education introduced by the British. The textbook culture also continued even after Independence in Indian schools as a dominant tool of pedagogy and as a symbol of the prescribing authority. Even though textbooks are universally used but they carry different meaning in different countries. In India the curriculum reflected a national character



and textbook continued to carry ‘the legitimized knowledge’ produced by National and State level bodies under the state sponsored guidelines.

Visible and Invisible Pedagogy and its impact on Identity formation

Theories on identity posit individual’s self vis-à-vis the immediate environment and the larger society. Identity theory (Burke, 1991; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980) looks into an individual’s self with an emphasis on his or her behavior, role performance and role relationships within groups. Secondly social identity theory (Turner, 1985) focuses more on individual’s self being shaped by group behavior and inter group relations. Identity theory emphasizes doing, social identity theory emphasizes on being (Burke, 1980). Identity of an individual thus shows his or her belongingness to a particular caste, linguistic group, religious community, or a nationality and the role he or she plays as part of it. It provides an individual’s consciousness, imbibed into him/her through his/her formative years. Such an identity nudges individuals to distinguish him/her as belonging to group A and not B. The formation of we and they is thus quite natural outcome of identity making and subsequent segregation of individuals in different groups (Jha, 2005). According to Holland (1998), becoming a member of a community means becoming embodied in a certain figured world, which is a world formed by characters and agents who occupy certain positions and position each other in a social space, who relate and interact with each other, and whose relations and behaviors are constrained by shared meanings and values. As such, these figured worlds are important resources not only for each individual to interpret his/her own practice and others’ practices, but also to guide his/her own participation within the community. So, by processes of participation and reification, individuals negotiate meanings about their experience in that particular context and about ‘who’ they are in that community of practice (Wenger, 1998). It is through this acquired identity an individual relates to its immediate milieu and the world outside. It is through the understanding of ‘we’ one associates with the community and society. While trying to understand the pedagogy in the sampled schools, the teachers were asked as to what is it they choose to define their identity for themselves and the students. It is important to ascertain



teacher's identity, their reference to students to gain an insight into how school education reinforces and aggregates students into different social groups.

Methodology

Institutional Ethnography is a method of inquiry that problematizes social relations at the local site of lived experiences and examines how textual sequences coordinate consciousness and ruling relations. It uses interviews, participant observations, text analysis and mapping as techniques. In other words in this form of study people and their talk is not used as the object of analysis but as an entry point into forms of extra locally organized knowledge. The schools which were studied under institutional ethnography is located in a place as shown in the diagram which is reeling under multiple layers of conflict and multiple free floating peace narratives. The clientele, spatial dimension and the texts were studied for the purpose to understand the identity of the clientele of the government schools in a region facing multiple conflicts' due to identity and ethnic orientations.

What Decides Identity of 'Self' for an Teacher?

There are various factors which are important in defining ones identity. It reflects that descent or the place where they have taken birth (motherland) is highly important for the Bodo and Assamese teachers. Majority of the Bodo respondents began their introduction when asked to share something about themselves with their 'name' followed by 'place they belong to': "I am from Udalguri" while others said "I am an Assamese or an Indian". Among the Assamese Teachers barring a few and hundred per cent of the Muslim teachers also said that place where they have got birth and residing is an important indicator of their identity. Being an Assamese however meant both the language and the place 'Assam'. This is particularly interesting in a place which is reeling under ethnic conflicts for the last so many decades for both descent and language. This also becomes important to analyze at this juncture how an ideology is transmitted or is intertwined to the lived experiences of the people. The identity of the teachers is shaped by the experiences they have. This is also true in case of their perception of the student's identity.



The School cannot be seen, as separate agents who transmit knowledge. It is very much a part of the society, culture, struggles, and protests and bears a strong ‘ethnic’ identity. It has been established that production, distribution and reception of curricular knowledge is integrally related to representation of culture and identity. Mary Lee Smith (2004) and her colleagues endorse a ‘theory of political spectacle’ when it comes to explaining the formation of educational policy and the distribution of values associated with policy. Whose identity, whose culture, whose knowledge? The question that arise is these perception perpetuated through these educational policies also requires to be located in the discourse of dominance and subalternity.

Perception of the ‘Other’ (Student in particular)

Majority of the respondents firstly talked about the economic background of the Students and drew a strong relation with their achievements. “*Amar schoolor loda sokol khube dhukhiya familir pora aahe*” (Boys from our school come from very poor background). Students belong to families of bus drivers, rickshawpullers, small shop owner, cultivators, and fisherman so on so forth. The identity of the Student’s family is firstly seen which determines the other abilities of the child. This was true in case of all teachers. Two fragmented identities which emerged from the narrative of the teachers were cultural capital and gender of the students. “*Amar schoolor Loda*” (Our school boys) is how both male and female teachers address students. Achievement of students was important, however their caste and tribal identities also found mention. The teachers felt that their tribal and caste identity was responsible for their ‘lower status’ and also poor performance in school. In fact the second important factor in defining student’s identity was Gender (fifty seven per cent) and Caste and Tribe (thirty four per cent) followed thereafter. A look at the profile of the Teachers also reveals a similar family and social background; however there were no signs of empathy rather there was a visible ‘pity’ for their situation on many accounts during the interview. These perceptions become visible to students in many ways. The identity building process neither begins nor ends with adolescence. It begins with the self-object differentiation at infancy and reaches its final phase with the self-mankind integration at old age. What is important about identity in adolescence is particularly late



adolescence. Resolution of the identity issue at adolescence guarantees only that one will be faced with subsequent identity “crises”.

“Discriminatory social experiences during adolescence in school relating to their cultural capital forms identities and self image which may hinder their progress or some who struggle to build spaces to bridge the social distance between different cultural groups. There is another category which emerges from the prevalence of a dominant cultural practice in schools. They contain dominant elements and engender their own “constitutive elements” (Butler, 1993, 21). The teacher’s pitiful attitude towards students implies those elements of subaltern behavior which has less democratic behavior. This could be a manifestation of their experience in school as majority teachers have experience where they felt they were discriminated for their ethnic identity during their school days.

This also has a direct bearing with the textual material used as the curriculum in school standard as the teachers largely teach students studying in these standards. Reference to ‘poverty’ is made as a ‘curse on humanity’ and it must be eradicated at any cost as referred throughout the text. Poor is used in reference to rural areas and mostly referred to ‘Peasants’. Urban ‘Poor’ has found mention in a couple of times besides used in the definition of poor. Poor has been referred as backward, illiterate, prejudiced and superstitious, lack of knowledge and skills so on so forth. Percentage of frequency of lack of knowledge and skill (twenty nine per cent) and rural (eighty three per cent), illiterate,(twenty three per cent) peasants(twenty three per cent) and rural (fifty seven per cent) reflect an attitude and perception towards not only poor but also the rural people –Gaoliya (A villager) a word often used to describe a person who is not up-to-date and clever.

Inequality is often not seen with tolerance and empathy but with a lot of brutality and degradation. Rural areas seen as an abode of ‘poor and backward people’ is also associated with similar references. This is also seen in the way teachers identify students from villages who belong to poor families. Poor is referred as illiterate, one who lack knowledge and skill, peasants, backward and superstitious and prejudiced. It is an overwhelming eighty three percent (reference percent) when it comes to representation of rural poor as one who lack



knowledge and skill. Lack of knowledge and skill is also found to have maximum frequency (twenty nine percent) even in the rural areas. Despite urban poor having the least frequency count; even then its reference is in the context of lack of knowledge and skill. Data available regarding urban poor in Assam is inadequate especially migrants and internally displaced people (IDP).

Poverty or poor is understood differently in various contexts. There are some standards which are fixed as Stein Ringen puts it, 'in the first case, poverty is defined indirectly through the determinants of way of life, in the second case, directly by way of life' (1987, 146). The official approach to alleviating poverty consists of three steps: first, data are collected on the extent and the geographical location of poverty; second, information is gathered on "causative" variables such as race, gender, and employment that may be correlated with poverty; third, information on the incidence of poverty and correlated variables is used in models to help formulate appropriate policy and action (Yapa, 1996, 712).

Appreciation, evaluation, criticism of a student in the school is not free from the constructs mentioned above. Certain attributes rather values of a student are highly appreciated and certain others are undervalued. Students are appreciated for good academic results, when they are able to produce what is being taught in the classroom. This is supposed to be the main purpose of school with only twenty teachers saying that excelling in sports and co-curricular activities are equally important as academics. There is a conscious understanding of I, Our and they and other constructs through dominant identities, culture, histories and knowledge. These are transmitted to the Student through various means though not very explicitly but through implicit ways. This process is reinforced through the mural paintings, rallies students become part of, and even during post riot or any natural calamity when school is transformed into a relief camp. The relation between teacher-student is shaped both by their own experience and perception and the subject they teach and both factors influence each other differently. It is not only confined to reproduction of the knowledge but also attitude, beliefs and behavior. As a result of this, students are also defined as good/ bad, poor/ rich, hard working/ lazy, Assamese medium/ Bodo medium, (besides medium it is served as an identity signifier of a dominant



group against the subaltern group), God-gifted/ordinary by teachers. These binaries are loaded with prejudice and a hegemonic educational discourse.

“Amar schoolor loda bilak birat beya. Porhatu beya”. (Majority teachers said that students in their school are bad) which meant that they are from poor background, rural background and parents are illiterate. They are also bad in studies. Ninety per cent of the sampled teachers belong to Udalguri town and send their wards to convent school in Udalguri or the nearby city which is three to four hours from the sampled district. The place, family, are important indicators in forming an identity of the students. Thus school doesn't exist in isolation but is a part of society its milieu and ethos. It is the children's parent's socio-economic status or their interest in educating their wards is foremost in explaining children's failure. However it is often seen that the success of the student is attributed to the school's success first. School is a social space occupied by different social agents who are embodied in a certain figured world that guides their behaviors and their interpretations. These social agents have different positions, status and power which shape each other and influence how each individual sees him/her, how he/she sees others and how he/she thinks others see him/her (Holland et al, 1998). Furthermore, there are many rules, norms and values (shared by the dominant society) that authorize the school to place students and teachers in certain positions, with certain responsibilities and duties, and with certain ways of acting, behaving, interacting and interpreting the social context (Gutierrez et al, 1995; Gee, 2000).

Students belong to different communities and to different cultural contexts, each with its specific figured world. Those who belong to literate social groups, whose figured worlds are an extension of the school's figured world, have 'practices of learning, behaving and talking that accompany school culture and legitimate it for themselves, creating identification with it' (Moreira, 2007, 2). However, for many students, school and their own original social group form two different communities, with distinct, most often unbridgeable figured worlds, which make it difficult for the students to interpret and participate in school/classroom practices and to negotiate their own identities and meanings about their own experience at school. Equipped with these data and understanding the author further looked at how teachers and students belong to social groups with similar (not same) figured worlds negotiate their experiences and



knowledge with the state sponsored schools. More than ninety five per cent teachers mentioned that their students make friends irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Even girls and boys become friends easily and they interact during class activities and sports events in school. The teachers were very keen on showing a picture which treats every child equally without any discriminating on the basis of caste, tribe, class and gender. This has led to contradictions where the teachers even female teachers referred to students as “*amar schoolor loda*” (Our school boys). Secondly separate sitting arrangements are made in the classroom and gender roles are found in school practices. Outside school work like marketing and organizing are given to boys and cleaning, decoration and cooking supervision etc are given to girls while organizing Annual Day. It struck the author as she was present in that school for the Annual day function. School’s role as a neutral agency is prescriptive and normative in most occasions. Udalguri being a Bodo region finds women engaging themselves in agricultural and allied activities. However stereotypical and fixed gender roles and norms are found in Bodo culture as well. It is a patriarchal society and due to the early influence of Hinduism, women’s role despite her contribution in economy, has been subjugated.

Even in schools male and female students are found interacting and talking, however, friendship would be an inappropriate word to describe this interaction. Even bicycle parking space for male and female students was different. On inquiring the reasons for such separation, they attributed certain characteristics with male students like ‘stealing other’s bicycles, troubling girls, eve teasing, etc. However these traits were not mentioned with concern but as playful non-serious, natural masculine traits which are common with school boys. All the schools had clientele from different cultural groups and all the teachers claim that there is friendship among all students irrespective of their multicultural background. One of the important observations in this regard was that the Bodo populace and students in this region fail to speak Assamese and hardly understand any other language besides Bodo.

Representation of the different communities and tribes also in the textbook reflect a particular direction towards the dominant culture and narrative. A common textbook is used all over the state and therefore events in the history are meticulously selected to suit the understanding of the Assamese bourgeoisie. Ahoms and Ahom rule in Assam get a considerable space in the



school textbook. Where every Ahom King is referred as an Ahom King, Koch kings like Krishnanarayan are not referred as Koch King who ruled Darrang (Udalguri was part of this district before BTAD was formed) and hailed as one of the greatest Kings of his times. Making a regime of a particular community nameless and faceless in school textbooks put forth the political spectacle of the educational policies again.

The Bodos find the least reference in the freedom struggle and in the overall reference also the Bodos are found to have the least frequency count. Besides the number it is also the context in which they are mentioned is also important. In the chapter-12 of standard X textbook titled ‘Cultural Heritage of India and the North East’ Koches and Meches are clubbed with the subaltern people belonging to the lower strata of the Hindu society who converted to Islam under the influence of the Sufi saints. One positive mention was of the Koch kings of Darrang under whose patronage Assamese literature flourished.

The Koch had once become very powerful branch of the Bodo-Kachari race when they established the Koch kingdom in lower Assam and North Bengal in the early sixteenth century. Baisagu finds mention as the Bodo word for Bihu festival. The representation of tribals as violent and protective of their land is also mentioned in a way that their warfare was very violent and they would attack whoever tried to encroach upon their land and property.

“The history of conquest and territorial expansion in the North east had never been peaceful for the British. The story is replete with tales of bloodshed and distressing facts” (X textbook, 37). Muslims are regarded as ‘invaders’ where as ‘Ahoms’ migrated from Yuan province of China and accidentally reached the Brahmaputra Valley. Some of the other excerpts from the textbooks regarding the subaltern is as follows:

“As a result of the invasions of the Turki-Afghan adventurers and fortuneseekers and the Mughals from the west many soldiers belonging to Islam, sometimes as prisoners of war and sometimes on their own behalf, stayed back in Assam after the military expeditions were over. And thus there began the settlement of the Muslims in Assam.”



“The partition of Bengal in 1905 brought Muslims to Assam as East Bengal (then) was clubbed with Assam to make a single province of Assam. The total population of the newly created province stood at 31 million of which 18 million were Muslims and 12 million from Hindu community” (X textbook , 32).

These facts and figures reflect fragmented identities viewed from a dominant cultural perspective. Fragments in the positivist culture are unimportant and irrelevant and eschewed from the dominant history. For a humanistic education these identity groups require to fully realize their own identity and space in the history. The excerpts quoted above also show which groups belong to Assam and contributed to its growth. Further in the chapter its contribution to Assam’s art and culture, literature are also discussed in detail. The Aryans and Ahoms which constituted the Assamese middle class also finds mention in the freedom struggle of Assam for India’s independence. In the context of the Tribals it mentioned:

“The Tribals fought for their own freedom and land”.

As Jordan and Weeden (1995) note, the cultural struggle is over the power to name, to represent common sense, to create the ‘official’ version of history and events, to speak on behalf of or for ‘others’. (Jordan and Weeden, 1995,13). The history of post-colonialism has been one of conflict between the perspectives embodied in these powers by post -colonial state and people of color that once colonized. The re-emergence of a politics of identity, culture and autonomy among those who have been marked by colonization has been one of the most significant elements in education in the past twenty years. The knowledge transmitted through the textbooks and the experience of the student in school and outside is contradictory and incites conflict as an outcome of this. The existence of conflicts in school and between students belonging to different communities and especially gendered experiences in school and outside is completely denied. School knowledge is unaware of the need, concerns and experiences of students. In school by being neutral the teachers, and school administration reinforce the ethnic and gender identities which students learn through various ways. Student’s questions and their conflicting experiences does not become part of classroom or school discussion. The aim of education was so completely identified with discussion of the contribution education makes to national growth. The different types of structure of the educational system, i.e. the different historical specifications of the essential functions only assume their full significance when



brought into relation with the different types of structure of the system of functions, themselves inseparable from the different states of the balance between the groups or classes by whom and for whom these functions are realized (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

The school is seen very comfortably through or rather in the name of discipline refuse to talk about conflicts. Identities are formed and because school education does not include local knowledge, histories, struggles and conflicts, nor the differences are discussed an arbitrary and topics which students fail to connect with their lived experiences, are taught as legitimate knowledge. This was a belief held unanimously by all teachers.

In fact one teacher mentioned ‘We teach them a different value which does not exist outside the school. Once they cross the school wall they are in a different world where there is no caste, religion tribe etc.’ These statements clearly show that school have totally segregated itself from the society at large and also its immediate milieu. Teacher as an agent of classroom processes plays an important role in the experiences of a student’s life. Any discourse on teacher-student relation, the role of the teacher becomes important as their ideological stand point bear a direct impact on the learning and identity formation of the student. Differences are considered unethical and in the process of forming artificial similarities, narrow identities, already form in their minds which manifests in conflicts among students.

Conflicts are considered ‘natural’ to the age group they belong to and not taken seriously. This was the response given by teachers across caste, tribe, and religious community. In fact in a bilingual school (where both Bodo and Assamese is the medium of instruction) wherein so much struggle of a subaltern community, history has witnessed, similar response was found. ‘Significant knowledge’ historically changing nature of knowledge is presented devoid of social conditions and changing social realities. Hence while we might consider our self as purely natural, authentic and untouched by society Foucault (2007, 17) claims that it is a product of modern examination. He further adds institutions and their discursive practices are the agents by which objects (individuals) are divided, classified, and subjected to normalization.



Considering the categories like normal versus mad, normal versus criminal, normal versus pervert, normal versus poor, modern versus traditional, and developed versus underdeveloped; they are the products of specialized discourses that determine the shape, form, and constitution of objects rather than subjects. Corporal punishment for example is banned in India believing that students learn best in a democratic environment. Protests and movement were organised to resist this power relation between the teacher and student. The critical theories of education also had a lot of impact to bring about paradigm shift in school education. All forms of corporal punishment, verbal abuse are harmful to the child. Currently, there is no statutory definition of corporal punishment of children in Indian law. Definition of corporal punishment can at best only be indicative. In keeping with the provisions of the RTE Act, 2009, corporal punishment could be classified as physical punishment, mental harassment and discrimination. Corporal punishment leads to adverse physical, psychological and educational outcomes – including increased aggressive and destructive behavior, increased disruptive behavior in the classroom, vandalism, poor school achievement, poor attention span, increased drop-out rate, school avoidance and school phobia, low self esteem, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, suicide and retaliation against teachers – that emotionally scar the children for life. Punishing children is regarded as normal and was referred non-seriously by all teachers. In fact they all recalled their experiences in school where most of the learning they claimed was because of the fear for the bat or spank from their teachers.

Conclusion

The data above shows how both visible and invisible pedagogy are at work in reinforcing the commonly held perceptions as legitimate and vice versa. Such depictions as Gramsci (1977) writes is not a matter of groups deliberately planning to oppress people or alter their consciousness (although this can happen) but rather how dominant institutions in society work through dominant values and conceptions of the world. In this process the school system legitimizes and through these various processes restrict rather gives a ‘particular direction’ to the potentialities of the students. The bureaucratic relation between the teacher- student and again the teacher and the administration reflects power. Who has the power to make decisions,



who makes laws, who is protected through laws, whose peace is restored, whose identity is glorified, in all these pertinent forms there is a dominant idea or ideas and dominant behavior of a 'Core' who possess power. The concept of self is produced through power relations that were fundamentally designed to prevent collective human liberation. At this juncture while analysing school as a counter hegemony site the author recalls Touraine (1981, 18) who through his Self Production Theory question pertaining: "How can one still talk of citizenship and representative democracy when the elected only look at the world market and the electors look only at their private life"? This is where the counter hegemony transformations begin questioning power relations and consciousness which forms perceptions about self and other in school. This holds importance and relevance particularly in a conflict situation where the roots of conflict are primarily located in the identity of the social groups and their organic and perceptual history of their identity and identity of others.

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