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BOOK REVIEW

Agrarian Questions: Old and New

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Mohanty, B. B. (ed.) (2016), *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition: India in the Global Debate*, Routledge, New York.

Agrarian Transitions: Historical Diversity and Contemporary Experiences

The history of agrarian development in countries like India is characterised by the persistence of mass poverty and increasing inequality in the countryside, with a large section of the population excluded from the growth spheres of economy and society. A majority of rural Indians remain engaged in agriculture even as the contribution of agriculture to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) falls. Agriculture in India has remained a low productivity, low-income economic activity. In social science literature, the nature of agrarian change is an important determinant of social transformation. The absence of decisive agrarian transition in the development process in India has been a fundamental barrier to improving the conditions of life of its people (see Byres 1986), even though there are lessons from recent history in other parts of the world that demonstrate that pre-capitalist relations in contemporary societies can be progressively transformed to overcome economic backwardness and expand freedom (see Dobb 1951; Byres 1995, 1986).

The volume under review sets out to answer five questions. The first relates to the nature of changes in India's agrarian economy under neoliberal globalisation. The second asks whether changes under global capitalism reflect a transition from a rural and semi-feudal economy to an urban and industrial capitalist economy. The third relates to the nature of agrarian transition and whether this transition conforms to the classical model. The fourth highlights regional diversity in terms of agrarian changes and development, and documents the experiences and responses to the transition from different regions and states. The final question relates to the responses of various agrarian classes and interest groups to the transition.

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At a more general level, the volume engages with and responds to an important contemporary debate. In the Byres-Bernstein polemic, Byres (1986, 1995, 1996) argued that successful national development has almost always been preceded by successful agrarian transition. In an analysis of agrarian transitions across different societies over the last two centuries, Byres (1986) identified six paths (namely, the English, the Prussian, the American, the French, the Japanese, and the Taiwanese or South Korean paths), in which the agrarian question was resolved through various forms and degrees of "agrarian transition." He points out three general paths of agrarian transformation in backward societies. Though he considers the transition to capitalist agriculture to be the most significant, other paths, namely, the socialist path and what he calls the populist path are also discussed. Byres (2003) maintains that the classical processes of social class differentiation within the peasantry will create a dynamic and forward-looking class of capitalist farmers. This class will be more productive and contribute to national capitalist development by supplying surplus to urban areas and developing a home market.

Bernstein (1996, 2006) critically elaborates on Byres' writings on the subject of agrarian transition. Classical political economy viewed agriculture as important for capitalist transformation for various reasons. It was the sector that could supply surplus for urban capitalist industrialisation and cheap wage goods for industrial workers. A population engaged in agriculture also expanded the home market for industrial goods. According to Bernstein, in an open economy post-globalisation, the import of goods and services, including foodgrain, has become easier, with mobile capital providing support to industry. These processes have meant that global capitalist development can proceed without resolving the agrarian question at the national level. In this context, Bernstein distinguishes between what are called the "agrarian question of capital" and the "agrarian question of labour." While the agrarian question of labour might still be of some analytical relevance for developing societies, the agrarian question of capital has ceased to be of any importance because of globalisation and its associated processes. The "agrarian question of capital" has been bypassed in the national development project of backward societies. First, he suggests that under capitalist agriculture, people are either capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers, or labourers and therefore, no transformation is possible. Secondly, in the classical agrarian transition process, the necessary linkage between agriculture and industry is forged and taken forward by the state. Bernstein argues that in the post-globalisation period, the state is either unwilling or unable to play this role. Capital is no longer constrained by national boundaries. National industrial development cannot be separated from international capital and global commodity chains. Land reform as a means of uniting landless or small peasants against landlords is a strategy that has lost relevance as national capital no longer looks toward "accumulation from below" for its sustenance (see Lerche 2013 for a longer discussion). The main contradiction here is between capital and labour. On the other hand, McMichael (2009) has argued that with the dominance of global corporate food regimes,

the main contradiction is between the peasantry and the global network of agro-capitalism.

The first section in the volume under review is titled "Agrarian Transition: Theoretical Discourse." It is followed by a section titled "Global Capitalism, Neoliberalism and Changing Agriculture." The final section is "Agrarian Transition: Regional Responses." In their opening chapter A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristobal Kay dissociate themselves from Bernstein's idea of redundancy of the agrarian question under globalisation. Taking their lead from the "historical puzzles" put forward by Byres (1996, 2003), they contest the widely held linear view of agrarian transition and development, often attributed to Marx and argue that diverse experiences of agrarian transition, both successful and unsuccessful, are consistent with Marxist political economy.

> This perspective – that Marx viewed the small-scale pre-capitalist peasantry as a structural impediment to the full fruition of the capitalist mode of production – is very widely held. It is also, in our view, false. (p. 55, volume under review).

The authors emphasise that capitalist penetration and consolidation in agriculture has always been a complex and contradictory process. This means that the presence of hybrid forms of the subsumption of the labour process by capital with various pre-capitalist means of labour control and surplus appropriation is entirely compatible with capitalist agrarian transition.

In "Revisiting Agrarian Transition: Reflections on Long Histories and Current Realities," Henry Bernstein points to the incomplete nature of agrarian transition in most countries of the South, including India. Drawing from Byres, he defines the classical agrarian question as consisting of three elements of the agrarian question (AQ). These are the problematic of politics (AQ1), of production (AQ2), and of accumulation (AQ3). AQ1 is associated with Engels, and concerns the political choices available to Socialist and Communist Parties, with reference to the peasantry under transition. The second (AQ2) is attributed to Kautsky and Lenin, who were concerned with finding out the nature of capitalist development in agriculture. The last (AQ3) concerns the role of agricultural surplus in the process of industrialisation of a society. Agriculture, in particular, is a prime source of accumulation for industry. According to Bernstein, Byres gives AQ3 precedence over AQ1 and AQ2 in this schema. If capitalist industry dominates social formations, the agrarian question ceases to have relevance. Substantiating this point, he notes that the increasing globalisation of agricultural production and markets, alongside a growth in productive forces of capitalist agriculture, has meant that the agrarian question of capital (AQ2 and AQ3) is no longer important. This is not only a contrarian understanding of the classical agrarian question but also of globalisation. Pointing out the inadequacies of the classical agrarian question, or paths to capitalist transition in agriculture by rejecting class analysis as a mode of investigation, and

class conflict as a focus of analysis, has become common in academia. Bernstein concludes the chapter with a warning to scholars that the challenges of studying agrarian change across the world cannot be fulfilled by falsifying "inherited notions of (agrarian) transition."

In the chapter on the peasant question in contemporary Asia, with special reference to India, D. Narasimha Reddy counters Bernstein's argument that the peasant question that formed the core classical agrarian question has been superseded in the wake of globalisation. He identifies two concerns related to the land-to-the-tiller agenda expressed by the Left on the land question. First, redistributive land reforms would allot small parcels of land to peasants but not lead to any gain in productivity. The second concern relates to the availability of land for redistribution in India, a problem that some observers have raised. Regarding the first, while the agrarian question of capital may not be as significant as in the past, the argument can be countered from a social justice perspective. Reddy points out that ceiling-surplus land is only one type of land available, and that it can be clubbed with "cultivable" government land and "Bhoodan" land, with government support. Bernstein's argument on the irrelevance of the agrarian question of capital may not be applicable to India as the rural population continues to face a livelihood crisis owing to a combination of factors, both historical and current. The other argument, which examines the contradiction between the "peasantry" and global corporate chains, is doubtful in the case of India.

Utsa Patnaik, in a chapter titled "Capitalist Trajectories of Global Interdependence and Welfare Outcomes: The Lessons of History for the Present," counters a number of inherited and widely-held assumptions about the history of capitalist development in developed countries. Such assumptions expect developing countries to follow a process of development similar to developed countries. Another assumption states that the primitive accumulation of capital involved displacement of peasants from their land, concentration of landed property through enclosures, and the absorption of the peasantry in more productive domestic industries. This capitalist transformation of agriculture created the conditions for domestic industrialisation. Patnaik disputes the historical validity of both observations and argues that conditions in developing countries are different from those in developed countries. The failure of the agricultural revolution in England, for instance, did not impact industrialisation because of the presence of colonies. With the advent of neoliberalism and global corporate interest in land and rural livelihoods, the agrarian question has become more important than ever.

D. N. Dhanagare, in a chapter on the neoliberal state and agrarian crisis in India, begins by pointing out that while the contribution of the agricultural sector to national GDP has fallen, a substantial section of the population continues to rely on the sector for employment. He discusses contract farming and bonded labour, and concludes that neoliberal state policy is responsible for the agrarian crisis.

In another chapter, B. B. Mohanty and P. K. Lenka review the relationship between capitalism and the peasantry in India. Post-Independence agrarian changes have led to a process of differentiation and proletarianisation within the peasantry. Landlessness has increased along with inequality in land distribution in rural India. The share of rural households that do not cultivate any land has increased from 38.7 per cent in 1993–4 to 48.5 per cent in 2011–12, marking a process of depeasantisation. The number of rural main workers within total main workers has seen a decline, signalling increased migration from rural to urban areas. The processes of impoverishment and proletarianisation of the peasantry are more significant in the agriculturally advanced States of Punjab and Haryana and industrially advanced States such as Gujarat and Maharashtra.

The last section of the volume has four articles that focus on individual states: Judith Heyer writes on Tamil Nadu, Daniel Munster on Kerala, Santanu Rakshit on West Bengal, and Sukhpal Singh and Shruti Bhogal on Punjab. Heyer's article discusses the loosening ties of patriarchy among the Gounders in Coimbatore. The article is based on the author's long-term academic engagement with the society and economy of a region where industrialisation has taken place and drawn people away from villages. With the expansion of the non-agricultural sector, fertility rates have gone down, and wages for female labour have increased, though they continue to be lower than wages for male labour. Education for women has made significant differences to their lives and work.

Munster's article on Kerala discusses the Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) method as a response to the persistent agrarian crisis and farmer suicides in Wayanad district. Munster endorses the Marxist view on ecology, though he believes that a more "farmer-focused" alternative is required. He presents the ZBNF as an alternative to dominant production and exchange paradigms with its new techniques of cultivation and limited dependence on external markets. The ethnographic study in Wayanad is situated in a context of despair and pronouncements of "ellam poyi" ("Everything is gone," or "We have lost everything"). ZBNF occupies a unique space, distinct from the state and NGOs to the extent that even standard organic farming is deemed exploitative and "demonic." Many farmers under ZBNF in Wayanad district formerly practised organic farming with little control over their farming practices, while agencies for certification made organic farming unaffordable. ZBNF is different from organic farming in at least two aspects. First, the method of natural farming respects the autonomy of farmers. Secondly, the method has a strong focus on soil fertility and uses "jivamrita" prepared from cow urine and dung. According to Munster, though ZBNF farmers do not share an explicit anti-capitalist agenda – on the contrary, they may appear to be closer to Hindu right-wing approaches to the ecological question – they still present an alternative for the future.

Santanu Rakshit's article on West Bengal is located within the framework developed by Kalyan Sanyal. Based on empirical studies of villages, the article traces the emergence

of a small class of capitalist producers in the production sphere, and the process of "stressed commerce" experienced by small farmers in the exchange sphere. Socio-economic differentiation among the peasantry is not a sufficient indicator of capitalist development in agriculture. Instead, the author suggests that the agrarian sector of West Bengal is experiencing a primitive accumulation of capital.

The article on Punjab by Sukhpal Singh and Shruti Bhogal focuses on the condition of small and marginal farmers in the State. In recent years the number of small and marginal holdings in Punjab has declined, opposite to the national trend. This adds to the increased burden of debt that has led to farmer suicides in the State. A process of depeasantisation is under way, because of which 14.4 per cent of the farmers in the State have moved out of agriculture since 1991. About 45 per cent of these farmers were from the small and marginal landholding categories. The core issue continues to be the unviability of small-scale farming, a problem that has to be addressed through policy measures.

Is the Agrarian Question Relevant Today?

The volume under review addresses pressing theoretical issues in agrarian sociology and political economy. In several accounts, the agrarian question under globalisation is either reduced to the peasant question (Bernstein) or the ecological problem of contemporary development processes (McMichael). The implications of this debate are diverse. First, the debate has implications for the redistributive land reforms agenda. Byres supports land and agrarian reforms, and there is evidence to do so he argues. The so-called inverse relationship between farm size and productivity does not apply to capitalist agriculture (Lerche 2013). On the other hand, Harriss (2013) has the following hypotheses in the context of the emerging nature of the agrarian question in India.

> (1) The differentiation and polarisation of peasant classes has nearly frozen; (2) land may no longer be so important as the basis of status and local power, nor serve as once it did to limit the livelihood possibilities of the poor, but inequality in landownership remains significant, and regional power based on landownership is still well established; and (3) the poor have loosened ties of dependence but exercise little leverage over the political space (pp. 357–8, also see Patnaik 2014).

Shah and Harriss-White (2011) acknowledge "the structure of agrarian property has clearly been transformed" (p. 14) with a lack of concentration of land and the persistence of small-scale peasant holdings. They note that much of the dynamism of contemporary agriculture is due to the presence of middle caste groups. Further, workers have not left agricultural work to join industry. Working households require multiple livelihood strategies. Caste identities have strengthened but caste as a system has collapsed and "rurality" as an empirical reality might belong to the past (Gupta 2005; see also Gupta 2015).

Secondly, the role of the state in initiating progressive agrarian and social changes is under scrutiny. Chatterjee (2008) argues that the peasantry no longer views the government as an alien institution. With the proliferation of government institutions, the peasantry has learnt to live with the state. Thirdly, however limited land reforms might have been, it has produced a class of landholders that is small but does not face direct opposition in the villages, as was historically the case. Fourthly, the relationship between the state and the peasantry is no longer an "extractive" one. Fifthly, peasants are not forced to move to cities, as was the case in the past. Much of the migration to cities and to industry is voluntary. Lastly, there is a desire among the peasantry and agricultural worker class to leave agriculture and move to towns owing to the promise of "anonymity" and "upward mobility."

A number of changes have taken place in the post-liberalisation period in the 1990s. First, corporate classes have assumed a position of dominance over the landed elite. Secondly, with the emergence of competitive federalism, regional party leaders have moved closer to international and national capital. Thirdly, the urban middle class has conceded to corporate morality in the wake of globalisation. Within this larger context, Chatterjee proposes a duality of civil society versus political society. While the urban middle classes employ managerial-technological ways to influence the state and support the capitalist class in accumulation, political society is dominated by the informal sector, the peasantry, or "non-corporate capital," which is not run on the logic of corporate capital or the morality of the bourgeoisie.

In sum, the relevance of the land and agrarian question is a matter of intense debate for politics and policy.

Put simply, the agrarian question in its classical form has three components. These include the nature, degree, and extent of development of capitalism in agriculture (i.e. capitalist development), the nature of classes that rise out of the development of capitalism (class formation), and the possibilities of class alliances and class struggle (Ramachandran 2011, p. 52). The agrarian sectors of underdeveloped societies are characterised by semi-feudal and pre-capitalist relations of production in agriculture and land. These include landlordism, various forms of petty tenancy, servitude and bondage of labour, and usury (Patnaik 2007, p. 11).

The forces of differentiation of the peasantry and the progressive dissolution of feudal relations may undergo differing degrees of mutation in different contexts. Further, the process of transition from a pre-capitalist agrarian structure to capitalist agriculture has varied significantly across developing economies. As Ramachandran (2011) argues,

> The principle "seek truth from facts" has been a hallmark of the agrarian studies of classical Marxism and beyond: while we study economic trends and trends in agriculture for society *as a whole*, our understanding must be moulded also by *local* conditions and forms of agriculture. Such sensitivity to local conditions – to

> agronomic and ecological conditions, to farming systems, to local social relations, to the history of land tenures, and to what Lenin called the "*scale* and *type* of agriculture" on individual farms – must characterise our study of agrarian relations. Variations in agrarian relations are not just a matter of differences in the level of development of the productive forces leading to some regions being more or less "capitalist" than others; the crucial feature of capitalist development in agriculture is, as Lenin wrote, that "infinitely diverse combinations of this or that type of capitalist evolution are possible." (p. 57).

The divergent experiences of agrarian transition across nations, namely, England, France, Prussia (referred to as "capitalism from above"), the United States ("capitalism from below"), Japan, and more recently, the South-East Asian region are instructive in this regard. T. J. Byres notes that the interaction between the role played by the state and the character of existing pre-capitalist social formations has often determined the nature of agrarian transition. In contrast to the experiences of successful agrarian transformations (differing in form, degree, and outcome), there are numerous examples of failed agrarian reforms in many developing economies. An interesting comparison, in this respect, is between the successful South-East Asian economies and the countries of Latin America. There is consensus among scholars on the crucial role played by the state in South-East Asia in completing the agrarian revolution, and the failure of the state in Latin American countries to pursue a process that began much before than it did in the South-East Asian economies (See Kay 2002; Borras Jr., S. M., Kay, and Akram-Lodhi 2007). We need to remember that the agrarian question, particularly in case of backward societies, has often been resolved in a contrasting and uneven manner. This provides a meaningful background for the analysis of agrarian transition in India in the post-Independence period.

The structural change model of economic development dictates that the size of the labour force employed in the primary sector, i.e., agriculture and allied activities, decline as the economy develops. The movement of the workforce towards the secondary and tertiary sectors signifies economic growth to the extent it usefully employs the surplus labour in a backward economy characterised by the perfectly elastic supply of labour in traditional sectors (Lewis 1954). The proportion of people dependent on agriculture in India has shown little change whereas the share of agriculture in GDP has fallen (Kuznets 1957; Sen 2002). The agrarian structure provides a limiting basis for the expansion of agriculture-industry linkages, development of a home market, and modernisation of the economy. A backward social and economic system rooted in landlordism and caste has meant the development of agriculture in India has remained stunted. On the other hand, the employment elasticity of organised manufacturing and industrial growth has historically been low and the proportion of agricultural labourers within the workforce employed in agriculture has shown an increasing trend (Patnaik 1983).

The importance of agrarian relations in the process of development has been understood in various ways (see Byres 1999; Rao 1999; Ramakumar 2006). While the transformation of agrarian relations is crucial for the modernisation of the economy, it is equally important for enhancing the different freedoms of rural working populations. The village-agrarian system of India is based on a highly skewed landholding pattern but gains strength from extra-economic coercion, as enabled by the ideological structure of the caste system. The freedoms of workers in agriculture are controlled not only in the productive process but also within the larger social system of the village (see Ramachandran 1990; Mundle 1979). In this regard, land reforms in India have not succeeded in weakening landlordism and redistributing land. Extreme poverty and social backwardness have resulted in low levels of literacy, health, and sanitation for a majority of labouring households. The caste system not only mandates rigid social and occupational hierarchy, but physical and social control over labourers. As Ramachandran (1990) notes, "the labourer in bondage and the free wage labourer stand at two ends of a continuum of degrees of unfreedom" (p. 170). Studies point out that backward agrarian relations and the caste system reproduce similar control mechanisms in an unfree labour regime, even in non-agricultural sectors (Heyer 2011). In this sense, the agrarian structure determines the form and extent of political democratisation of village-social life and social and political movements.

The nature and relevance of the agrarian question under globalisation, especially in India, continues to be an important concern. A recent study by Yadu and Satheesha (2016) shows that the rate of landlessness among rural households has gone down over the period between 2002–3 and 2012–13 (see Table 1).

According to data from the National Sample Survey Organisation, any household owning less than 0.002 hectares is classified as landless, but this is an underestimation. The study defines effective landlessness as any household that owns less than 1 acre (0.04 hectares) of land. By this definition, landlessness has increased from 60.1 per cent in 2002–3 to 66.1 per cent in 2014. This is in addition to marginal holdings, which now constitute over 75 per cent of total holdings.

Table 1 *Landholdings in India, 2002–3 and 2012–13* in per cent

Category of holdings	Percentage of households		Percentage of area owned	
	2002—3	2012—13	2002—3	2012—13
Landless	10.04	7.41	0.01	0.01
Marginal	69.63	75.42	23.01	29.75
Small	10.81	10.00	20.38	23.54
Semi-medium	6.03	5.01	21.29	22.07
Medium	2.96	1.93	23.08	18.83
Large	0.53	0.24	11.55	5.81

Source: Yadu and Satheesha (2016)

Further, it is important to highlight the regional dimensions of agricultural growth and agrarian changes in India. States such as Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have less than 51 per cent of their workforce employed in agriculture, whereas Bihar has over 65 per cent of its workforce in agriculture (Lerche 2011). The impact of the green revolution on class, regions, and crops has perpetuated a certain class structure in the country. Public investment in agriculture has fallen with the success of the second round of green revolution in the 1980s. At the same time, private investment in agriculture has not increased. Even today, government policies benefit the original beneficiaries of the green revolution as far as class, region, and crops are concerned (*ibid.*).

The volume successfully captures the nuances of the Byres-Bernstein debate, including its elaboration of the classical agrarian question, its contemporary relevance, and its diversity across societies. The larger lesson from the volume concerns the nature of agrarian change and the question of mobilisation for progressive agrarian transition. The volume establishes the need to take the agrarian question seriously and poses important questions on the relevance of the agenda for agrarian reform. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) has recently observed,

> The fact that land is no longer the sole, or even dominant, source of income and economic activity for the class of landlords and big capitalist farmers has important implications for our movements, particularly the struggle for the seizure and distribution of landlords' land. The report suggests that we need fresh thinking on how to fight a class enemy of this type. In a situation where the hegemony and dominance of landlords and big capitalist farmers derives from their overall control of a wide range of economic activities and institutions in villages and their surroundings (and not solely or mainly from village-based exploitation), we cannot fight this class on the issue of land alone. While recognising the centrality of the land question, and the importance of the demand for comprehensive land reform, we also recognise that even the demand to identify, occupy, and redistribute ceiling-surplus land has become a demand that is not immediately realisable — for a variety of subjective and objective reasons — in many areas at the present moment (CPIM 2016).

This is a clear assessment of agrarian changes in India over the last few decades. While the classical categories remain relevant, fresh thinking on the issue of popular mobilisation for the resolution of the agrarian question is needed. Understanding agrarian transition in India requires that two specific issues be taken into account. First, the current agrarian scene is a differentiated one, comprising the older landlord class and its allies (consolidated into the capitalist farmer and rich peasant class) and the majority of the peasantry, including landless agricultural workers. Landlessness has not declined and land redistribution continues to be a focal point for public mobilisation and policy advocacy. The articles by D. N. Reddy and D. N. Dhanagare testify to this observation. The village studies in different States of the country by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) have made similar observations. The importance of agricultural work for landless and marginal

peasants has witnessed a sharp decline in the rural economy. The non-agricultural sector has registered rapid development, in terms of number of days of employment for manual workers in villages. However, in the absence of thoroughgoing agrarian reform, non-agricultural sectors have often replicated forms of labour in the agrarian system. The sources of power for the erstwhile landlord class and the new capitalist farmer class are now more diverse. In sum, while the process of agrarian transition in India has deviated from the classical and other experiences (not entirely unexpected given that even the classical cases present diversity rather than a uniform pattern of transition), a democratic society cannot be envisaged without resolving the agrarian question. The argument that the primary contradiction is between global corporate capital and a unified and homogenous peasantry may not be plausible in the Indian context.

The second aspect of agrarian transition in India relates to the specific experiences of Dalits, Scheduled Tribes, and women in agrarian social relations. As Habib writes, "the existence of 'untouchables' was thus a pillar of Indian peasant agriculture from very early times, ever since, that is, the food-gatherers and the forest folk were humbled and subjugated by settled agricultural communities" (Habib 1963/2014, pp. 143–4; see also Kosambi 1975). In India, the landless class of wage labourers was, and continues to be tied to a specific social position in the caste hierarchy. A distinct class of landless agricultural labourers existed before the advent of colonial rule and the development of capitalist relations in agricultural production. This is a uniquely Indian problem and the land question for Dalits and Scheduled Tribes continues to pose a challenge to Indian society and polity. In the last few years, a number of socio-political movements for land or against land alienation have seen active and leading participation from Dalits and Scheduled Tribes. Issues related to land, livelihoods, and social dignity have been consolidated into newer demands. The democratisation of social and economic life is dependent upon the resolution of the agrarian question. With the growth of democratic consciousness, issues of land and caste have to be addressed in a unified way.

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