



## GENIUS UNBOUND: MUGHAL EMPEROR JALAL-UL-DIN MUHAMMAD AKBAR'S PURSUITS OF LEARNING AND TRANSLATION MOVEMENT DESPITE LACK OF HIS FORMAL EDUCATION

**Sumia Sabir**

MPhil Scholar, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of Sargodha,  
Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

[1sumiasabir@gmail.com](mailto:1sumiasabir@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This article explores Mughal Emperor Akbar's pursuits learning and translation movement, despite the lacking of formal education, proved him a genius, fond of knowledge wisdom, and an intellectual emperor in history due to his services and interest in gaining more and more wisdom through the discussions of scholars and translation. Akbar's establishment of Ibadat Khana at Fetahpur Sikri and Translation Bureau facilitated the translation of various Indian, Arabic, Turkish and Christian texts into Persian. This endeavor promoted intellectual discourse, cultural exchange, and tolerance, defining the golden era of the Mughal dynasty.*

**Key Words:** Akbar the Great, Informal education, Ibadat Khana, Translation Movement

### 1. Introduction

Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605) is renowned for his visionary policies, contributions to learning, and translation movement, and others which collectively defined the golden era of Mughal dynasty. Notwithstanding his lukewarm interest in education during his formative years and the absence of formal schooling, Akbar demonstrated exceptional intellectual acumen and a profound commitment to intellectual pursuits throughout his reign. Following the consolidation of his empire, Akbar devoted considerable attention to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. For instance, one of the most fascinating institutions established by him is the Ibadat Khana at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575.

Despite numerous scholarly attempts, the precise nature and function of this institution remain elusive and warrant further investigation. It is widely acknowledged that the site served as a venue for discussions and debates on matters of culture and religion, convened by erudite scholars representing diverse religious affiliations. These scholarly debates subsequently piqued Akbar's interest in commissioning the translation of an increasingly vast array of Indian religious texts particularly and Arabic, Turkish and Christian texts commonly into the Persian language. To facilitate this endeavor, Akbar established a dedicated translation bureau, wherein a team of esteemed scholars and collaborated to render prominent texts. Venerable texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and others were translated through diverse methodologies by a collaborative team of scholars comprising both Muslim and Hindu experts.

### 2. Literature Review

As noted by Makhanlal in his book *The Religion of Akbar*, Akbar's accession to the throne at the tender age of 14 necessitated the hand Bairam Khan, who provided instrumental guidance and support during the tumultuous early years of his reign. (Roychoudhary, 1941) According to Syed Ali Nadeem's article, "Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar's Ibadat khana", following his conquests and victories emperor Akbar was afforded the opportunity to devote himself to intellectual pursuits and wisdom, leading to

establish the institution with the express purpose of ‘establishing a feast of truth’ (Razavi, 2008).

As noted by Athar Abbas in his book *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar’s Reign* theological debates and discussions on free will, predestination, and the creation of the Holy Quran were commonplace among Muslims, Christians, and Jews during the Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) periods, driven by a desire to satiate intellectual curiosity and establish the superiority of one’s faith to the other’s. Similarly, Akbar demonstrated a profound interest in engaging in religious and intellectual discussions, motivated by a desire for self-education and spiritual fulfillments (Rizvi, 1975).

According to Audrey Truschke’s article, “A Padshah like Manu: Political Advice for Akbar in the Persian Mahabharata” the translation of a manuscript typically involved a collaborative effort among a diverse group of individuals, including scholars, translators, scribes court artists, and Brahmin Sanskrit intellectuals. For instance, the translated version of Mahabharata was a product of multiple contributors and a collective methodology. Notably, the Mughal translators, lacking proficiency in Sanskrit, relied on a team of Brahmins to facilitate the translation process (Truschke, A Padshah like Manu: Political Advice for Akbar in the Persian Mahabharata, 2020).

In her another article “Defining the Others: An Intellectual History of Sanskrit Lexicons and Grammars of Persian”, Audrey notes that Indian possessed a profound understanding of astrology. The Mughal kings too, consistently employed two distinct groups of astronomers, who were responsible for casting royal horoscopes according to both Islamic and the Indic astrological systems (Truschke, Defining the Others: An Intellectual History of Sanskrit Lexicons and Grammars of Persian, 2012).

### **3. Research Questions**

This study investigates, how an emperor who did not acquire formal education in his childhood was able to prove himself as a genius emperor and undertakes initiatives for translating wisdom and knowledge? What strategies and approaches did Akbar employ to overcome the challenges of lacking formal education and achieving his intellectual goals? How the intellectual discourse at Ibadat Khana contributed to Akbar’s growing fascination with translation? How did Akbar’s interactions with scholars and intellectuals from diverse backgrounds influence his intellectual pursuits and translation initiatives?

### **4. Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study involves a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary source utilize is Abdul Qadir Badauni’s *Muntakhib-ul-Twareek*, a seminal historical text providing valuable insights into Akbar’s reign. Supplementing this primary source, secondary data has been collected from an array of scholarly materials, including books, journal articles, internet archives and libraries of Punjab University, Agha Library of Sargodha University and Central library of Al-Karam International Institution.

This multidimensional approach enables a nuanced understanding of Akbar’s wisdoms and intellectual pursuits and institutional initiatives, despite lacking of his own education, providing a richer contextualization of his remarkable achievements.

#### **5.1 Akbar’s Educational Background**

Jala-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar was born on Sunday, the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Rajab, in the year of 949 AH, corresponding to 15<sup>th</sup> October 1542, in the town of Amarkot, (Ali K. , 1998) situated in the present-day province of Sindh. His mother name was Hamida Banu Begum. Notwithstanding his future accomplishments, Akbar’s early life marked by a lack of formal education, as he demonstrated little inclination towards academic pursuits during his childhood. However, from a remarkably young age, he had been deeply enamored with and

attentively listened to the poetic verses of the renowned Persian mystic, Rumi and Hafiz (Ahmad, 1936).

Upon ascending to the throne at the tender age of fourteen, he confronted with a multitude of challenges within his empire, including several rebellions that necessitated his immediate attention. Notably, he was compelled to engage in a protracted conflict with Sikandar, which lasted for three months. Furthermore, Hemu Baqal, a prominent minister at the court of Adil Shah Suri (1554-1555), seized control of Delhi, prompting Akbar to take a decisive action against him. The ensuing conflict culminated in the Second Battle of Panipat (964 AH/1556 AD).

## 5.2 Akbar and the Institution of Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri

Following the consolidation of Indian empire, he redirected his focus towards the pursuits of education, knowledge and wisdom. As part of his efforts to promote intellectual and spirit discourse, he commissioned the establishment of the *Ibadat Khana*, a revered institution that was completed in 1575. The emperor's primary purpose its establishment was to create a platform where scholars and representatives from different religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism, could gather to discuss and debate various theological and philosophical issues. As a devout adherent of Sunni Islam, he demonstrated profound reverence for venerated Sufi saint, Hazrat Khwajah Mueen-ul Deen Chishti (1142-1236), frequently paying his respects at the saint's revered shrine. (Badauni, 2008)

Concurrently, he was also exposed to the Shia school of thought, largely due to his father's admiration for Persian culture and literature, as well as his mother's affiliations with Shia Islam. Furthermore, during his formative years as emperor, Akbar was under the tutelage of Bairam Khan, a Shia Muslim, and the Indian administration was largely molded on Shia principles. Notably, the Sadr-us-Sudur, Shaikh Gadai, who oversaw the imperial administration, was also a Shia Muslim. (Parshad, 1930) The emperor was also profoundly influenced by the philosophical concept of *Wahda tul-Wajud* and implemented a novel religious code of conduct, known as *Sulah-e-Kul* (peace for all), which was more commonly referred to as Din-i-Ilahi, a syncretic faith that aimed to promote universal peace, tolerance, and harmony among people of diverse religious backgrounds.

However, despite their efforts, Din-i-Ilahi failed to gain widespread popularity and remained largely confined to the imperial court during Akbar's reign. Nevertheless, a coterie of devoted scholars, including shaikh Mubarak, Abu-al Fazal and Faizi, dedicated themselves to promoting and propagating the faith. Although there were initially three such institutions, but the *Ibadat Khana* of Fatehpur Sikri emerged as the most prominent and influential during Akbar's reign. At the heart of the *Ibadat Khana* building stood a prominent platform, upon which the emperor would take his seat, surrounded by four esteemed ministers:

Abd-ul Rahim Khan-i-Khana (1556-1627), the renowned poet and statesman; Birbal (1528-1586), a Hindu distinguished wit and counsellor, Akbar was also inspired by him; Faizi (1547-1595), the celebrated poet and scholar; and Abu-al Fazal (1551-1602), the accomplished historian and philosopher. (Roychoudhary, 1941) This shows the Akbar's intension for knowledge and wisdom that all the four ministers were intellectuals and highly educated.

The *Ibadat Khana* was formally inaugurated every Thursday evening, where dignitaries and scholars would convene to participate in prayers and intellectual discourse. Institution's interior was elegantly adorned with an array of vases, fresh flowers, fragrant scents, and exquisite perfumes, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere. Furthermore, the *Ibadat Khana* housed a comprehensive library, providing scholars and visitor with access to a vast repository of knowledge and literary works. The erudite discussions and debates among

scholars and intellectuals belonged to various religions at the House of Worship, served to further intensify Emperor Akbar's fascination with philosophical and literary pursuits. Consequently, Emperor issued a decree mandating the translation of various works into Persian.

### 6.1 Translation Bureau

Although Akbar was not the sole ruler of India who took the initiative of translation of wisdom, for instances, history can be traced back to the reign of Asoka the great (r. 269 BC-232 BC) who embraced Buddhism after the war of Kalinga (261 BC) and scribed the teachings of Buddha in local languages. This process was done through translation. Another notable example during the reign of Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388), exhibited a profound fascination with astronomy, with particular emphasis on the astrolabe, thereby underscoring his intellectual curiosity and patronage of scientific pursuits.

He commissioned the translation of esteemed Sanskrit astrological text into Persian, thereby facilitating the dissemination of ancient knowledge and fostering a deeper understanding of celestial knowledge, two of them are as under:

1. A manuscript translated by Izzauddin Khalid Qazi and translated version was given the title as *Dalail-i Firuzshahi*. This treatise undertook an in-depth examination of the astronomical phenomena associated with the seven celestial bodies, with particular emphasis on their ascensional and descensional movements, as well as their respective begin and malign influence.
2. Another esteemed manuscript, *tarjumah-i Barahi* or *Kitab-e Barahi Sanghta*, was meticulously translated by the erudite scholar, Abdul Aziz Shams Thanasari.

Badauni mentioned that these books were taken from the temple of Nagar Kot. This collection probably attributed to the Brahmins of antiquity comprised approximately one thousand and three hundred in number (Badauni, 2008).

Notwithstanding the existence of translation movement during Delhi Sultanate, it was the Mughal dynasty (1526-1857), specifically during the illustrious reign of Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, that witnessed a significant acceleration and culmination of this intellectual endeavor. Although the founder of Mughal dynasty Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur (r. 1526-1530) and his successor Humayun (1530-1540, 1550-1556), both were fond of knowledge and wisdom. But Akbar paid a special attention towards the accumulation of knowledge in official language.

A dedicated house of writing also known as *Maktab Khana* (translation bureau) was established specifically for the purpose of facilitating the translation process at Fatehpur Sikri (Agra), (Rice, 2010) where court historians and scholars were instructed to translate work into Persian. (Wills, 2022) It was directly under the supervision of Akbar (Srivastava, 1964). The primary objective of emperor was to facilitate a meaningful exchange of ideas between Persian-literate Muslim scholars and Hindu intellectuals, while also satiating his own insatiable thirst for knowledge and learning (K. Ramasubramnian, 2019). The bureau undertook a comprehensive translation project, yielding a seminal series of rendered works encompassing a diverse array of subjects, including astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, folklore and various other disciplines.

#### 6.2.1 Scholars and Translation

A plethora of erudite scholars and skilled translators patronized by emperor during the course of translating esteemed manuscripts, notable among whom are the following.

##### 6.2.1.1 *Singhasan Battisi* and *Atharva Veda*

In the year 1574, Emperor Akbar commissioned the esteemed writer and historian, Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni (1540-1615), to undertake the translation of the revered Sanskrit text, *Singhasan Battisi*, into the Persian language. A distinguished Brahman scholar was

appointed to collaborate with him, providing expert interpretation of the Sanskrit text to facilitate its accurate translation. In compliance with emperor's directive, Badauni translated two pages of the text and submitted them for review on the same day.

Emperor was pleased with translation, deeming it satisfactory and completed in one year. Translated version entitled as *Nama i-Khirad Afza* (The Wisdom Augmenting Book). *Singhasan Battisi* is an ancient Indian collection of 32 Sanskrit stories, revolved around king Vikramaditya, a legendary monarch. Each narrative corresponds to a throne, and collectively, they comprise a compilation of moral anecdotes, fables, and instructive tales that impart valuable life lessons, wisdoms, and sage counsel. Subsequently, emperor entrusted Badauni and Shaikh Bhavan (d.1601) with the task of translating the text, *Atharva Veda*.

The translation endeavor persisted until 1583, at which juncture it was ultimately discontinued (Ali M. A., 1992). The arrival of Shaikh Bhavan at the court of Akbar marked the inception of a concerted effort to translate venerable Indian texts, thereby initiating significant cultural and intellectual endeavor. Shaikh Bhavan was Brahman scholar, embraced Islam and reached at Akbar's court to take services from Deccan. As the purview of *Ibadat Khana's* activities expanded and adherents of diverse faiths were invited to participate in the deliberations, the necessity for authoritative and accurate Persian translations of various sacred texts became increasingly pressing. In the year of 1578, Akbar commissioned Abul Fazal to undertake the translation of *Injil*, also known as the Gospel, into the Persian language.

#### **6.2.1.2 Translation of Mahabharata and Ramayana**

The venerable Indian epic, Mahabharata, was rendered to Persian by the esteemed Abul Fazal. In the prefatory remarks to his Persian translation of the Mahabharata, Abul Fazal provided a comprehensive exposition of the motivations that inspired him to oversee the translation of Sanskrit works into Persian under his patronage with the collaboration of Faizi, Naqib Khan, Mulla Shiri, Badauni, Sultan Thanisari and were assisted with Sanskrit scholars, Deva Misra, Caturbhuj, Sataadhani and Madhusudana (Zamani, 2019). During his reign, the translation of Mahabharata was accorded paramount importance for several compelling reasons.

Firstly, the epic constituted a foundational text of Hinduism, rendering its translation a matter of considerable significance. Secondly, it provided a detailed account of the world's great antiquity and the history of its inhabitants, thereby offering valuable insights into the past. Lastly, the study of this epic enabled individuals to derive instructive lessons from historical events and apply them to their present circumstances, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of human experience. The work was completed in the year of 1583 and the Persian translation was named *Razm Nama* (Book of War).

The emperor held this book in high esteem, regarding it as a foundational and authoritative treatise on the principles and practices of governance and statecraft. The esteemed epic, Ramayana, was meticulously translated by a distinguished team comprising Naqib Khan, Sultan Thanisari, and Badauni. According to Badauni's records, the translation was accomplished within a remarkably brief period of four years, with its completion being noted in the year 1591.

#### **6.2.1.3 Rajatarangini and Kathasaritsagara**

Emperor's patronage of translation extended beyond religious texts to encompass historical works as well. Notably, the *Rajatarangini*, a chronicle of Kashmir penned by Raja Kulhana in 1148-49, was translated into Persian by Mulla Muhammad Shahabadi, thereby, making this significant historical work accessible to a broader audience after the annexation of Kashmir in 1586 by the Mughal empire. But the translated version of Shahabadi was polished by Badauni at the order of emperor. Another notable text, the *Kathasaritsagara*, composed by Somadeva in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Kashmir, was comprehensive compilation of Indian folk tales

and stories. Initially, this text was translated at the court of Sultan Zain-ul Abideen (r.1420-1470), entitled as *Bahru'l Asmar* (Ocean of Stories).

#### **6.2.1.4 Kalila Wa Dimna**

This esteemed literary work, compiled circa 200 BC in India, constituted a classic anthology of Fables and stories. The title of this collection derived from the names of two Jackal characters featured prominently in the narratives. Prior to emperor Akbar's era, this work had been translated into various languages, including middle Persian (Pahalvi) during the Sassanian empire (224-651 CE). Furthermore, it was also translated during the period of Abbasids dynasty by a renowned scholar Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa. In India, firstly it was translated by Nizamud Din Abu'l Ma'ali Nasru'llah bin Muhammad in 1144 then by Husain Wa'iz. But their translations were more rhetorical and verbose. Akbar ordered Abul Fazal to rewrite it in simple version. He completed the work 10 July 1588 under the title of *Iyar-i-Danish* (Fineness of Wisdom).

#### **6.2.1.5 Astronomy and Mathematics**

Akbar was not only interested in the translation but also in religious and philosophical texts. Throughout history, Indian scholars have demonstrated exceptional proficiency in both mathematics and astronomy. Notably, three seminal Sanskrit works were meticulously translated into Persian by Fathullah Shirazi and Abul Fazal. A famous text known as *Litavati*, was translated by Faizi and assisted by a Sanskrit scholar from Deccan, resulting in the Persian rendition, *Nuskha-i-Lilavati*. The *Lilavati* is a seminal treatise penned in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the illustrious Indian astronomer and mathematician, Bhaskara (b. 1114), whose contributions to the fields of astronomy and mathematics continue to be widely acknowledge. This treatise, owed its eponymous title to Bhaskara's daughter, *Lilavati* (literally mean a graceful woman), to whom the work is dedicated. (Agarkar, 2016) In preparation for his daughter's nuptials, Bhaskara had carefully selected an astrologically auspicious moment for the ceremony. However, fate interned when the water clock, which had been set up to determine the precise timing of the marriage, malfunctioned, thereby preventing the union from taking place. In an effort to console his distraught daughter, who would subsequently remain unmarried, Bhaskara offered words of comfort, stating, "I will author a treatise bearing your name, which will endure for eternity, for a noble name is akin to a second existence, and confers immortality upon one's legacy." It encompasses a broad spectrum of mathematical disciplines, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, thereby providing a through exposition of fundamental mathematical concepts.

#### **6.2.1.6 Arabic Texts**

Akbar also extended his patronage to Arabic literature, as evidenced by the translation of esteemed Arabic work, *Majma-ul Buldan*. This encyclopedic treatise on geography, replete with fascinating anecdotes about the wonders of the world, was presented to the emperor by Hakim Humam. Subsequently, a team of approximately ten to twelve erudite scholars was carefully selected to undertake the translation of this notable work. Notably among them Mulla Ahmad of Thatta, Shaikh Munawwar, Qasim Beg, and Badauni.

#### **6.2.1.7 Turkish Texts**

Babur authored a seminal autobiography, penned in the Chaghtai Turkish language, which has been widely acclaimed as the *Babur Nama* or *Tuzk-i Babri*. This esteemed work provided invaluable insights and data pertaining to the history and geography of Central Asia, India and Kabul. In the year of 1584, Mirza Payandah Hasan undertook the translation of the aforementioned work, but unfortunately, his efforts were limited to the first sixth and a portion of the seventh year. Subsequently, in 1589, Akbar entrusted Abd-ur Rahim Khan-i-Khana with the task of re-translating the work. Khan-i-Khana successfully completed the translation on 24 November 1589, surpassing the quality of previous translations and

demonstrating exceptional skill in his rendition. This book was also translated during the reign of Jahangir (r.1605-27).

**6.2.1.8 Christians Works**

During Akbar’s reign, the Portuguese displayed a keen interest in India. Father Jerome, a Jesuit missionary, arrived at Akbar’s court on May 5, 1595, and remained in attendance until the emperor’s demise. During his seven years stay, Father Jerome studied Persian and translated Christian texts into the Persian language. At Akbar’s behest, he collaborated with Abd-ul Sattar bin Qasim Lahori to translate a Portuguese work based on the Gospels into Persian. The translated work was titled as *Dastan i-Masih* (Life of Christ) or *Mira tul-Quds*. He wrote a letter to the Portuguese King, requesting him to send an embassy of historians and philosophers, especially he took interest in Greek philosophy. On the emperor’s orders, the esteemed historian Abdul Sattar Muhammad Qasim Farishta was required to acquire proficiency in Latin and Portuguese, with the purpose of translating the philosophy and religious writings of the Europeans (Salim, 1993).

**6.3 Technique and Methods of Translation**

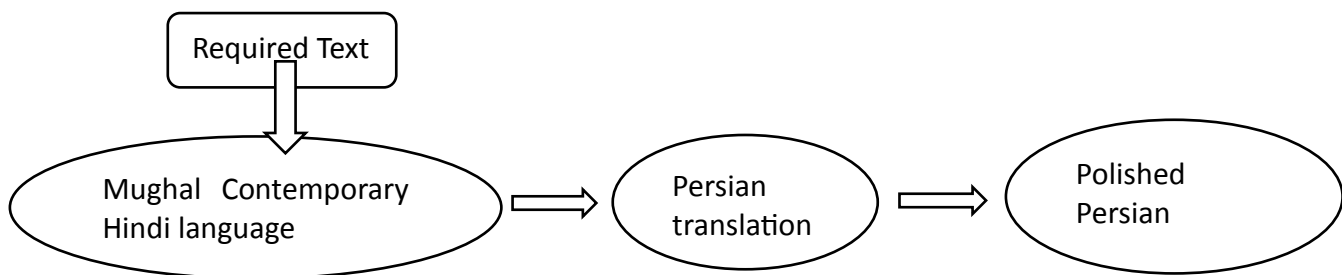
Within the Translation Bureau, established during Akbar’s reign, the process of translation was undertaken by a collaborative team of scholars and translators, comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims, rather than a single individual proficient in both Sanskrit and Persian language. The team consisted of individuals with expertise in either Persian or Sanskrit.

During the reign of Akbar, two methodologies of translation were adopted:

1. Method of Paintings
2. Method of literary translation

Akbar’s fascination with legendary genres was well-known, and among his favorites was the Hamza Nama, a compilation of heroic and bravery tales of Amir Hamza (d. 624), the Uncle of the holy Prophet Muhammad. Akbar took a new initiative for converting that book in paintings. He commissioned his court painters to illustrate the legends of Amir Hamza, entrusting a team of one hundred skilled artists with the task. The project was initially overseen by Mir Saiyed Ali Judai, and later by Abdul Samad Shirazi and the task was planned into 12 volumes.

Typically, the literary translation process involved a multi-stage approach, wherein the required text underwent successive transformations before its final rendition.



A multi-stage methodology was employed for translating requisite texts. Initially, ancient Sanskrit texts were rendered in contemporary Hindi by the Hindu scholars. Subsequently, these Hindi translations were converted into Persian by predominantly Muslims scholars and translators. Finally, the Persian translations underwent a refinement process, wherein they were polished into elegant Persian verse and prose. (Hormasji, 1939) Scholars had to face many technical difficulties and errors during the process of translation from Sanskrit to Persian. Scholars endeavored to maintain authenticity and impartiality in their work. A

notable example of this commitment is the *Razam Nama*, which commenced with an invocation to Lord Ganesh, deviating from the traditional Islamic practice of beginning with the *Bismillah*, an invocation to Allah (Haidar, 2011).

## 7 Conclusion

Akbar's remarkable journey from an uneducated monarch to a champion of learning and translation is a testament to his intellectual curiosity and vision. Through the Ibadat Khana and translation Bureau, Akbar fostered a culture of intellect inquiry, tolerance and cross-cultural exchange. His translation movement not only preserved ancient knowledge but also facilitated the dissemination of ideas across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Akbar's legacy serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of lifelong learning, intellectual humility, and the pursuit of wisdom.

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