# UNIT 2 RASA - DEFINITION, NATURE AND SCOPE

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to learn the literary theory from the concept of 'Rasa.' It would therefore be appropriate to explain the meaning and scope of the term. It is also very important to know that in the Indian context, the concept of rasa is central to all discourse about literature. It can also be seen as a pervasive influence in the theories of painting, sculpture, drama and dance in addition to poetry. Hence, it is necessary to understand how and why the concept of rasa dominated the critical scene in India.

Thus by the end of this unit, you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of the concept
- understand it as a general theory of literature
- it's study in relation to other theories
- it's emergence as the major literary concept
- it's pervasive influence in arts

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

As a general theory of literature, the *Rasa* doctrine (*rasa-vada*) is based on the premises that literary works (as verbal compositions) express emotive meanings and that all literature is typically emotive discourse or discourse that has to do with the portrayal of feelings and attitudes rather than with ideas, concepts, statements of universal truths, and so forth. It also raises a host of philosophical questions. What kind of entities are the emotions, what is their objective or ontological status. How are they recognized? How do they get expressed in words? These and other related questions will have to be considered seriously.

In the history of Sanskrit literature the concept of *rasa* has been developed in detail and in a multifaceted way. It has remained central to all literary discourses.

The term 'rasa' may not find a good equivalent in English, but in its basic sense means 'aesthetic relish'. Though a specific attitude is required to appreciate rasa yet it is not a conditioning by experience that the Behaviorists forge. Experience of rasa is also in terms of an inner process that occur in the individual while going through a literary piece or performance. Hence, this aesthetic relish is not concerned with mere linguistic behavior in an empty way but communicating a distinct eternal flavor or mood such as tragic, comic, erotic and so forth. A distinct role is given to what can be referred to simply as the common human emotions treated in the poem termed as Bhavas and the art of emotion or rasa that emerges from such treatment. While it is believed that in the history of Sanskrit poetics, perhaps no other concept has given rise to so much controversy. It appears to be a truth to an extent since the author of Rasagangadhara who tries to review in detail the diverse shades of expert opinion centering round rasa, is driven to confess at the end that the only common point that emergesis: 'rasa is felt', as that which is invariably connected with the highest joy and partaking of beauty in the world.

#### 2.2 **DEFINITION**

The term *rasa* in the Vedic literature derives from the root '*ras'* which means to taste, sweet juice, sap or essence for instance, '*raso vai madhu'* (*Shatapatha Brahmana* vi.iv. 3-27); '*raso vai sah'* (Taittiriya Upanishad. 2.7.2.) etc. The classical interpretations of Bharata's famous '*Rasa*-Sutra' explains it as: " Emotions in poetry came to be expressed through the conjunction of their causes and symptoms and other ancillary feelings that accompany the emotions' (*Natyashastra*. 6.31). Bharata here stipulates four necessary conditions that must be present for an emotion to become manifested: (i) causes (*vibhavas*, (ii) symptoms (*anubhavas*, (iii) feelings (*vyabhicharin*), and (iv) their conjunction (*samyoga*) (*vibhava anubhava vyabhicharisamyogat rasanishpattih*. NS 6.32.). A reading of *Natyashastra* (NS) will show that Bharata never indulges in the metaphysical discussion about the aesthetic response of the man/woman of taste. He recognizes how it varies from individual to individual. It is not justified to estimate *rasa* with a set of general arguments by citing experimental results and not by revealing the basic ideas in the foundations of emotional sensitivity.

Causes (vibhavas): The causes of an emotion are those that generate or excite the emotion or are the occasion of that emotion. In Sanskrit, the cause is designated by the term *vibhava*, a word synonymous with *karana*, *hetu*, *nimitta*, all of them meaning 'cause.' It is also called a *vibhava* because knowledge of an emotion through words, physical gestures, and involuntary psychic symptoms (sweating, trembling and so forth) expressive of that emotion.

This is again of two kinds, the first is the primary cause or the object of emotion (internal object in modern terminology), which is defined as "that, resting on which, as its object, emotions like love are born'. The Sanskrit term for this is *alambana-vibhava*. This may be a person, scene, object or thought that excite a person's emotion and appears to him in a certain light or under a certain description. It is not however, the case that the mere presence of the object will necessarily excite an emotion in a person. It will not, unless the object is 'intended' by that person as an object of his feeling and he is moved to think of it under a certain description.

Second is the exciting cause (*uddipana-vibhava*). The object of an emotion is the generative cause of that emotion because, although it is the object to which the emotion is directed, it is also the reason for that emotion. That is to say that the emotion will not possibly arise in a person without the actual presence or thought of that object. But the object in itself is not sufficient for the emotion to develop unless the circumstances are also appropriate. For example, love between two young people grows into a full-blown passion when conditions, such as privacy, moonlight, a pleasant climate and so forth are present. So, under the exciting causes are included all the attended circumstances that enhance the feeling. Familiar examples of these would be the 'atmospheric' setting in Edgar Allen Poes' 'The Fall of the House of Usher', and the images of sterility, dryness, agony and death in Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. The objects simply help the emotion to exhibit itself and therefore, are called 'causes' in a secondary sense.

#### **Expressions and Symptoms**

Emotional states will become objects of discourse only when they are expressed in an overt or visible way, in speech, action or gesture. In the works of Charlton, "The idea of any emotion is...in general bound up with the idea of how it is manifested..." Hence, the conjunction of the symptoms with the causes is of utmost importance in any discourse about the emotions. The Sanskrit word for the behavioral expression is 'anubhava' which means etymologically, 'that which follows or ensues from the feeling (as its effect)'. Anubhava is that which 'makes the feeling apprehensible'. The expressions, the words, actions or gestures are in one sense the effects of their emotions and appear after emotions. But from the point of view of the observer, they are the indicative signs of the emotions, motions, changes in appearance, and actions that point to the emotions. Through them, the emotions which being internal conditions, must otherwise remain unknown, are made known or objectified.

#### **Ancillary Feelings**

When a feeling is being expressed in a poem as a primary mood, other feelings that normally accompany it are called its ancillaries. No feeling, however basic, appears in its severest purity of form but attracts other emotions as well. Thus, if love-in-union is the emotion being treated, it will attract a host of other feelings, bashfulness, infatuation, agitation eagerness, pride, vacillation and others. These ancillary feelings are called *vyabhichari* or *sanchari-bhavas* (transient or fleeting emotions) because they come and go at will in association with the principal emotions and help stabilize them. Without the reinforcement of the fleeting emotions, no emotion can be developed into an enduring mood. Poetic organization consists, not only in developing an emotion into a sustained mood, but also in developing an emotion into a sustained mood by exhibiting an entire emotional sequence of alternating stands.

#### **Their Conjunction**

As Abhinavagupta points out, it is only when the full paraphernalia of objects, expressions and accessory feelings is present that the composition will be most effective. For this reason, the dramatic presentation has been regarded as the best form of entertainment. Therefore, in it, a whole situation is elaborated with a picture-like vividness. In a written composition, however, this picturesqueness results from the verbal descriptions, and the appropriate actions have to be realized.

## 2.3 NATURE

Although, rasa, as originally propounded by Bharata was purely an aesthetic concept, it has through the centuries, been absorbed into theological discussions and consequently become strongly tinged with one or the other metaphysical trend. Bharata's commentators themselves sought, from time to time, to give a metaphysical twist to the rasa theory. Rasa, according to Bharata is the first known formulator of the relishable quality inherent in an artistic work which according to him, is its emotive content. Every work, poem or play is supposed to treat an emotive theme and communicate a distinct emotional flavor or mood, such as tragic, comic and so forth. In this sense, one can speak of the rasa of a work and also, since there are many such moods of poetic or dramatic 'moods' or 'emotions', of rasas in the plural. A distinction is also made between the common human emotions, treated in the poem which are termed 'bhavas' and the art of emotion or 'rasa' that emerges from such a treatment, the assumption being that the raw stuff of the emotions presented as undergone by characters in a play or by the speaker of a lyric poem is transformed in the process into a universalized emotion and rendered fit for a contemplative enjoyment. In the second sense in which the term is understood, rasa is relishable experience occasioned by the work in the reader or spectator which may be referred to as the 'rasa experience'.

The rasa theory states that the aim of poetry is the expression and evocation of emotions and that a poem exists for no other purpose than that it should be relished by the reader. Aesthetic experience is this act of relishing or gestation (rasana). The idea that poetry expresses emotions and moves us is not of course new to Western criticism. It is implicit in Aristotle's 'Poetics', in the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition generally, in Longinus particularly, in Romantic expressionistic aestheticians down to Croce, and in such modern critics as Richards and Eliot. But the Western prejudice against emotions in poetry, too, is as old as Plato and the Puritans. Traditionally, Western criticism has reflected a division of loyalties between the opposite principles of 'dulce' and 'utile', so much so that a complete aesthetics of the emotions was not possible unless it was also justified by moral, cognitive or philosophical values. This is true even of Aristotle. In the Indian tradition, on the other hand, one finds a more consistent and systematic theorizing about poetry in terms of the emotions and an attempt to explain the whole area of poetic semantics as well as aesthetic psychology centrally from the standpoint of emotions.

The emotive theory was not by any means the only theory to be advanced by the classical Sanskrit critics. Sanskrit poetics had its school of metaphor (*Alankara*), which thought of figurative or deviant expression as the special characteristic of poetic language and its school of style (*Riti*), which believed that a special arrangement of words, of phonetic and syntactic features, constituted the essence of poetry. Then there was this influential school, that of suggestion (*Dhvani*), led by Anandavardhana, and his commentator Abhinavagupta. This school argued that poetic indirection was a special, supernumerary activity of words, outside both literal and metaphoric functions. However, these two critics were also responsible for developing Bharata's doctrine of emotions, which Bharata himself applied mainly to dramatic literature, into a unified theory of poetry. At their hands, the concept of *rasa* became the central criterion of poetic semantics, it subsumed even the principle of suggestion.

The rasa theory implies that there are a number of specific emotions, each with its distinct tone or flavor, and not an anonymous aesthetic emotion or a host of nameless emotions. As Bharata said, "Drama is the representation of the mental states, actions and conduct of people" Natyashastra. 2.112). Thus, Bharata lists as many as forty nine emotional states (bhavas), of which eight are primary or durable states (sthayin), with their corresponding rasas or aesthetic moods; thirty-three are transitory states (vyabhicharin); and eight are involuntary expressions, like tears, horripilation, trembling, and so on, which are also thought to be mental states even though they appear as physical conditions. The eight basic emotions are erotic love, comic laughter, grief, fury, heroic spirit, fear, wonder, and disgust or revulsion. Only these basic emotions can be developed into distinct aesthetic moods, whereas the other, transient emotions come and go according to their affinity with the durable emotions. Later commentators, however, added a ninth emotion to Bharata's list of eight basic states, namely subsidence or serenity (shanta). The final number of basic emotions in the rasa tradition is therefore taken to be nine.

Check Your Progress I		
Note: Use the space provided for your answers.		
1)	What is Aesthetic relish?	
2)	What are the premises of <i>rasa</i> doctrine?	

## 2.4 SCOPE

Sanskrit poetics also avoids the pitfalls of the various transcendental revelatory theories associated with Romanticism and traceable largely to neo-Platonic doctrines. Theorists in this tradition believe that the artist has a vision of reality hidden behind the appearance of things and makes the revelation of this vision the object of his art. The trouble with this view is that the critic has no means of knowing this vision of ultimate reality except through the work itself and that when he does come to know about it, he cannot ascertain whether it has been faithfully reproduced or embodied in the work. The Sanskrit critics speak of art as an object of enjoyment rather than as a medium for transmitting inspired versions of ultimate reality. Although for them art occasions a supernal delight, its matrix is common staff of human emotions. Aesthetic experience is simply the apprehension of the created work as delight, and the pleasure principle cannot

be supported from aesthetic contemplation. This delight is regarded as its end and as having no immediate relation to the practical concerns of the world or to the pragmatic aims of moral improvement or spiritual salvation. Sanskrit theory is thus opposed to a didactic, hortative view of literature. Abhinavagupta declares that poetry is fundamentally different from ethics or religion and that the principal element in aesthetic experience is not knowledge but delight, although poetry may also lead to the expression of our being and enrich our power of intuition (NS 2.115).

The whole problem concerning the language of poetic emotions centers on the question, Can emotional qualities be tested as they are normally taken to reside in the subjective experience of the writer or reader? The answer to this question hinges on our being able to describe the connection between the work of art and the feeling in the work of art itself and, in a sense, make it testable. The approach in the light of Wittgenstein's logic seeks to avoid the dangers of both expressionist and affective theories by locating feelings squarely in the work of art itself instead of imputing them to any actual person, artist or observer. It does not evaluate the work either by inquiring whether it has faithfully expressed the author's alleged feelings or by examining its effects on the minds of the audience. The feelings we find in the poem or play are objective qualities present in the work. They are not the feelings of anybody in particular; they are just feelings defined by their objects and situational contexts. The language of feeling is not then a private language; it is more a system of symbols, a language game that is understood by those who have learned it's conventions and usages.

This objective emphasis is, in fact, quite congenial to the Indian theorist. The rasa theory itself, as formulated by Bharata in his Natyashastra, deals with the emotions in an entirely objective way. In his famous rasa-sutra (formula), Bharata explains how emotions are expressed in poetry: "Emotions in poetry come to be expressed through the conjunction of their causes and symptoms, and other ancillary feelings that accompany the emotions". Here Bharata stipulates three conditions or situational factors that must be present together for an emotion to become manifested: (i) that which generates the emotion, which includes (a) the object to which the emotion is directed (i.e., the intentional object, alambanavibhava), for example, Juliet, and (b) other exciting circumstances (uddipanavibhava), for example, youth, privacy, moonlight etc.: (ii) the overt expressions (actions and gestures) that exhibit the emotion, called *anubhavas*, for example, tears, laughter etc. : and (iii) other ancillary feelings, such as depression, elevation, agitation etc. that normally accompany that emotion. The object, thus set forth by Bharata, of representing the various emotions in terms of their attendant conditions make the poetic situation very much a public situation.

Bharata's commentators, were careful to point out the emotions treated in poetry are neither the projections of the reader's own mental states nor the private feelings of the poet: rather, they are the objective situations abiding in the poem (kavyagata), as its cognitive content. The sorrow presented in the Ramayana is to be taken not as the personal sorrow of the poet but sorrow itself in its generalized form and identified by its criteria. If it were only a feeling personal to the poet, it would not attain the status of a poem (shlokatva) and would not be fit for the reader's contemplation. It is further stated that the possibility of the poetic emotions being objectified in the work is dependent on their representation in

words. *Rasa* is apprehended as residing in the work, in the situational factors presented in an appropriate language.

That poetic emotions have their 'life in the poem' and arise only in relation to their formal representation in the poem is also the conclusion of T.S. Eliot. Speaking of Ezra Pound's poetry, Eliot says that Pound's verse is always definite and concrete because "he has always a definite emotion it. Feelings and passions, Eliot further argues, are not merely subjective but objective and public. Bharata's rasa-sutra affirms as much. Emotions exist and are manifested in inalienable association with their causes and circumstances. As they are known in life by their objective signs, so also are they apprehended from the language that describes them. It would therefore be wrong to bring the charge of subjectivism or naïve emotionalism against the rasa theory.

A critic may pose a problem as follows: Meanings and ideas are of course objectively present in the work; they can, for instance, be adequately and most often unambiguously specified. But since there can be no equally sensitive control of emotional response we are here in the realm of the subjective. This difficulty is fully appreciated by the *rasa* theorist. Hence, Bharata and following him, Anandavardhana set up an elaborate logic of the emotions and a body of criteria for situation appraisal, *rasauchitya* (propriety in the treatment of emotions), based on public norms and standards (*lokadharmi*, *lokapramana*). It must not be forgotten that what the Sanskrit critics are talking about are not the elusive inner happenings of the Cartesian theory but' meanings' of emotive situations and behavior as they enter into human discourse. Emotions in poetry are as objective and public as 'meanings and ideas' are and can be specified as adequately as the others can be.

The Sanskrit critics however do not wish to banish the affections from the poetic experience. Nor do they entirely dispense with mental concepts. Bharata whose approach to aesthetics was more practical than philosophical, assumed that the emotions expressed in poetry are the emotions felt by the poet and shared by the audience. But Shankuka, an early commentator on Bharata, saw the difficulty implicit in Bharata's formula for emotional expression and stated that emotions, being mental states cannot be directly known or expressed; the knowledge of them is made possible only by their perceptible causes and effects which are their logical signs, not of intra-psychic states themselves.

Abhnavagupta too, recognizes this distinction between inner mental states and their conditions and signs and points out that, while these signs serve to manifest or make known the emotions, they are not identical with emotions themselves. The two belong to two different orders of existence (the one is physical and insentient and the other mental and sentient), and they are apprehended by different organs of perception. Both Shankuka and Abhinavagupta agree that emotions are mental entities that are not identical with their natural expressions or with their verbal representations. Thus, they both assume that they are logically and epistemologically prior to their outward manifestations while at the same time they admit they can become known to others only through their external signs.

In Sanskrit criticism, there is a lively debate on the nature of poetic truth. In his commentary on Bharata, Abhinavagupta sums up many views on the nature of dramatic representation and argues against the prevalent theories of imitation

and Illusion. Bharata defined drama by the term 'anukarana', which may be translated as 'mimetic reproduction': "Drama is a reproduction of the mental states, actions and conduct of people". Abhinavagupta's prdecessors, Lollata and Shankuka, who commented on Bharata's work, understood dramatic representation in mimetic terms and held that aesthetic perception is illusory cognition (mithyajnana), although it does produce real emotions in the spectator.

The connection between the imitation and illusion theories is obvious. An imitative reproduction of the real, whether in the medium of paint, words, or physical gestures, cannot be the real thing: consequently, the response evoked by it is base on illusion. Abhinavagupta argues that drama, and by extension all poetry (*kavya*), is not an imitation but a depiction or description in words (or enactment in the case of theatrical performance) of the life of the emotions that in turn, arouses the latent emotive dispositions of the actor or spectator and causes him to reflect on the presented situation with a degree of sympathetic identification.

Check Your Progress II		
<b>Note</b> : Use the space provided for your answers.		
1)	Can emotional qualities be tasted?	
2)	How will you explain Bharata's rasa-sutra?	

#### 2.5 POETRY AS EMOTIVE MEANING

The best definition of literature is perhaps contextual and one that takes into account the nature of the literary situation and the purpose and motivation of the sentences employed in it. It is easier to define the nature and type of a discourse by its context than by its linguistic form. It is in these terms that the *rasa* theory conceives of the nature of literature. The purpose of literary discourse is, according to this theory, neither the statement of universal truths nor the prompting of men to action but 'evocation'. Bhattanayaka, a staunch defender of the *rasa* doctrine as well as a critic of *dhvani* theory, distinguishes the poetic from the other forms of literature, such as the Vedas, scientific, ethical and historical texts, by it's evocative aim (*bhavakatva*). In poetry, both words and meanings directly contribute to the aim of *rasa*-evocation and are subordinated to that activity.

Abhinavagupta agrees with Bhattanayaka that the function of poetic language can be said to consist only in evocation. Pleasure alone is the primary end of poetry: the instruction provided by it is but a remote aim. Poetry too, he declares, is in this sense essentially enactment, although language is its sole medium and mode of presentation. Bharata had stated that "no poetic meaning subsists without rasa". According to his etymology, bhavas (emotions in poetry) are so called because they bring into being (bhavayanti, evoke) corresponding aesthetic moods. They are an 'instrument of causation'. Therefore, Abhinavagupta concludes that' rasa is the fundamental aim and purport of poetry.' Anandavardhana too says 'Where rasa, in it's various forms, is not the subject matter of discourse there no manner of poetry is possible.'

There is no poetic theme that is not infused with *rasa*, no object that does not become the cause of an emotion. Even as all themes and ideas become poetic when infused with *rasa*, all elements of language viz. figure, meter, rhyme and all such verbal and phonological devices must also derive their efficacy from a *rasa* context by contributing to the evocative function. They do not rest in themselves since they can be understood only through *rasa*, which is the final resting point of all poetic discourse.

## 2.6 THE VALIDITY OF RASA AS A THEORETICAL CONCEPT

Bharata's rasa doctrine was commented on in diverse ways both before and after Abhinavagupta, and many reformulations and mutations of it appeared in the course of its history. Valid criteria for evaluative judgments can be formulated only on the basis of permanent or necessary properties, which all literature must possess and not on the basis of non-necessary properties, such as complexity, irony and so on. Auchitya, translated as 'propriety' is understood by the Sanskrit writers as the harmonious adaptation of the poetic means like the language, figure, image and so on to the poetic end. This end is conceived by the rasa theorist as the evocation of rasa. While, thus, the final ground of reference in poetic criticism is evocation of aesthetic moods, the only criterion of beauty is appropriateness, the idea that, in poetry good and bad is to be determined on the ground of appropriateness and inappropriateness and that merits and faults do not obtain abstractly but depend on many inter-related factors, such as suitability of language to theme, tone, context and so forth. All writers, from Bharata down, assumed decorum to be a central regulative principle. Bharata treats 'auchitya' in relation to the problems of drama and stage presentation. Anandavardhana also considers propriety an imperative but he is emphatic in stating that the sole consideration in deciding the propriety of form and matter is the end of delineating the rasas, to which all other features must be subordinated.

In modern times L.A. Reid says that what art embodies are emotive values, which can be perceived as objective qualities of the work, 'not facts or ideas as such' many Continental theorists down to Croce had a stake in the emotionality of art, including music. But they were for the most part thinking either of the artist's self-expression or of the reader's or viewer's response. For instance, Eugene Vernon focuses on the artist's character and genius, whereas Tolstoy, with his 'infection' theory focuses on the communicative aspect. Kant's theory of disinterested delight as being characteristic of aesthetic attitude has a parallel in

Abhinavagupta's aesthetics. But his philosophy of taste is response oriented, although judgments of taste are taken to be valid interpersonally, whereas the emphasis of the *rasa* theory is object centered. Susan Langer is undoubtedly one of the prominent aestheticians who have accorded a central place to 'feeling' in the philosophy of art. Her theory of art and literature should be of great interest to the Indian theorist not only because of certain affinities to the *rasa* concept but because she makes a particular mention of that concept in the context of her discussion of the dramatic form.

Bharata, in his *Natyashastra*, assigned specific emotional or suggestive values to musical note (*svaras*) and melodic patterns or '*jatis*' (later called *ragas*) when they were used in stage presentation for evocative purposes. But there is no suggestion in Bharata that the musical notes by themselves express any particular emotions. A *raga* is so called because, etymologically. It produces a mood, albeit in a vague way, or is colored by it. Any given *raga* may be adapted to a variety of moods. A *raga* can become the vehicle of a mood when it is employed in an expressive context, when, for instance, a lyric is set in a *raga*. Therefore, melody is related to the meanings of the song, not as an expresser (*vachaka*), but as a suggestor (*vyanjaka*). Both Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta recognize that musical sounds too can be suggestive of *rasa* in this way.

The great emphasis placed on *abhinaya* or gestural enactment is a clear indication of the influence of the *rasa* concept on Indian dancing and on play-acting as well. Bharata dealt with both dance and drama, and so both these arts were for him natural adjuncts of the theatre and vehicles of dramatic expression. The relation of *rasa* doctrine to the arts of painting and sculpture is, however, more intimate since these arts are understood by the ancient Indian writers as being essentially representational. According to the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, painting and sculpture, like expressive dance, 'reproduce all that is the object of experience'. They employ the same eye-expressions, hand-gestures and body postures that are found in dance. Even as one speaks of the dramatic emotions (*natya-rasas*), one can also speak of the *rasas* expressed in painting or sculpture (*citra-rasas*). Emotion (*bhava*) is thus accepted as one of the criteria of painting, together with symmetry, similarity, proper disposition of colors, and so on.

Check your progress III		
<b>Note:</b> Use the space provided for your answers.		
1)	What is the Scope of rasa?	
2)	Reflect on the Validity of the concept of <i>rasa</i> .	

## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

A brief profile of the major concept of criticism in Sanskrit literature viz. the theory of *rasa* together with a meaningful discourse, wherever possible is given. The Nature, Scope and other related areas have been discussed within the permitted space. Also, an attempt to introduce in a comparative light, the views and critical thinking in the West is made to enable students for their own further studies.

## 2.8 KEY WORDS

**Rasa** : Relishing, taste.

Dhvani : SuggestionAlamkara : Figuration

## 2.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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