UNIT 12  URBAN CENTRES AND OTHER TYPES OF SPACES*

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12.1  INTRODUCTION

The onset of urbanism engendered new ideas about the division of space in early India. We shall focus on the texts composed in north India. So, we shall discuss categories that emerged in the Brahmanical and the Buddhist traditions.

Before we examine notions about space in the sixth century BCE, it will be useful to examine the notions of space in the pre-urban world. Our information about the pre urban phase is derived from the Vedic literature. The composers of the Vedas believed that they lived in the Saptasindhu (seven rivers) area. However, the idea of seven rivers as a region is not clearly specified. The horizon of the poets of the Vedic age was defined in terms of their proximity to rivers like Saraswati and Sutlej.

12.2  PRIMARY CATEGORIES OF HABITATION

A study of the Vedic literature shows that the primary categories of habitation were defined in terms of contrast between the grama (village) and the aranya or vana (wilderness).

12.2.1  Grama

The Rig Veda uses the word grama to refer to a body of men (jana). In fact, a later Vedic text, the Shatapatha Brahmana, refers to a leader named Sharyata Manava as roaming with his grama. Grama referred to a group of sajata kinsmen in the Yajurveda. It had the connotation of a pastoral group on the move. Sometimes when pastoral groups (grama) came together there was sangrama (battle), literally coming together of villages. However, even in the time of the Rig Veda, the word grama could also refer

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to agricultural settlements. It referred to the inhabited area of the cultured people. Surrounded by ploughed land it contained houses of people. Villages contained cattle, horses, and other domestic animals, as well as men. Grain was also stored in them. There are references to the vraja (cattle resort) to which the milk-giving animals go out in the morning from the village (grama). Villages were probably open, though perhaps a fort (pura) might on occasion be built inside. There are some references to pura meaning rampart, fort or stronghold.

Many of Brahmanical rituals of the later Vedic period were followed by war expeditions and raids. These raids were not so much attacks on enemy kingdoms as raids on neighbouring territory. The Taittiriya Brahmana mentions how in former times the Kurus and Panchalas went east on raiding expeditions during the Rajasuya sacrifice. It was a time when there were only a few settled agricultural communities, and those too had restricted resources. So, an alternation with raiding and transhumance would help increase the resources of the leaders of the community. At this point the dominant meaning of the word grama seems to have been spaces and communities who combined agriculture and transhumance.

12.2.2 The Aranya

Whoever stays in the forest at evening imagines
Someone is calling his cow; someone else is cutting wood;
Someone is crying out.
…Mother of wild beasts, untilled by a plough but full of food,
Sweet-smelling of perfume and balm
To her, the spirit of the forest, I offer my praise.

Rig Veda: hymn in praise of Aranyani

The words aranya and vana did not necessarily refer to forest. It has been translated as wilderness. In many instances the aranya referred to uncultivated land. Animals and plants of the village were contrasted with those that lived in forest or grew wild in the woods. The aranya had a negative connotation in the minds of the composers of the Vedic texts. This alien outside sphere was inhabited by communities of the yakshas, rakshasas, vanaras and countless other groups that were feared and looked down upon. It was the abode of thieves. In the Sama Veda, the aranya is more generally opposed to the abode of civilized men (kavyayah, ‘sages’ as opposed to vanargavah, ‘savages’). Dead were carried to the aranya to be buried. Hermits too lived there. There was a saying ‘In the grama, one undertakes the consecration, in the aranya one sacrifices.’

In the later Vedic period there are references to jana-pada roughly translated as ‘the place where people placed their feet’. The janapada in the Brahmana literature signified both the ‘people’, as opposed to the king and the ‘land’ or realm.

12.3 NOTIONS OF SPACE AFTER THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN CENTRES

With the emergence of urban centres in the sixth century BCE new categories in the classification of space emerged. Texts that were composed in this world of cities have several new features. They point to the presence of a variety of settlements like villages, cities, janapadas and mahajanapadas. These settlements were considered part of a hierarchically organised world. Some units of settlement were considered superior to others. This statement from the Mahaparinibbana-sutta of the Digha Nikaya gives us a clear idea of the notions of hierarchy of settlements. While the Buddha lay dying in Kusinara, Ananda, the favourite disciple of the Buddha, requested him to take his parinirvana in a city which would correspond to his exalted status:
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Let not the Exalted One die in this little wattle-and-daub town, in this town in the midst of the jungle, in this branch township. For, Lord, there are other great cities such as Champa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Saketa, Kosambi and Benaras. Let the Exalted One die in one of them. Where there are many wealthy nobles and Brahmmins and heads of houses, believers in the Tathagata, who will pay due honours to the remains of the Tathagata.

Settlements like villages, cities, janapadas and mahajanapadas were parts of a larger entity variously called ‘Jambudvipa’ (Jambudipa) or ‘Aryavarta’. For example the Cakkavattisihanadasuttanta of the Dighanikaya says:

Jambudipa will be mighty and prosperous, the villages, towns and royal cities will be so close that a cock could fly from each one to the next. This Jambudipa will be pervaded by mankind even as a jungle is by reeds and rushes. In this Continent of India there will be 84000 towns with Ketumati (Benaras), the royal city, at their head.

According to the Anguttara Nikaya Jambudipa had pleasant parks, pleasant groves, grounds and lakes. It also contained steep precipitous cliffs, impassable rivers, inaccessible mountains and dense jungles. These references indicate that Jambudvipa consisted of a variety of settlements.

The Brahman tradition too mentions units like the Bharatavarsha and Aryavarta. The boundaries of these entities vary in different sources. However, it is clear that the composers of texts were visualizing a region that was larger than the mahajanapadas. Panini, a grammarian who lived in the sixth-fifth century BCE, envisages a linguistic unit that was larger than the mahajanapadas. He used categories like ‘Udichya’ and ‘Prachya’ to denote areas following varying traditions of Sanskrit speech. ‘Udichya’ and ‘Prachya’ were further sub-divided into areas like Kapishi, Gandhara, Koshala, Kashi, Magadha and many other territories. Similarly, notions like dakshinapatha and uttarapatha also emerged in this period. Such an idea of space that divided Jambudvipa into territories of east-west and north-south were premised upon an idea of a middle territory. That is why the literature of the sixth-fifth century BCE refers to the ‘madhyadesha’ (middle country).

12.3.1 The Middle Country

Located in the larger world of the Jambudvipa or Aryavarta was a unit of settlement called the ‘Middle Country’ (madhyadesha). Madhyadesha was the place where the conduct of people was in accordance with dharma. It was the place where people spoke the chaste language. Its towns and villages are described in glowing terms. The Brahmanical and Buddhist texts exhort people to follow the cultural practices of the people of the ‘middle country’. The Buddha lived and preached in the majjhimadesa (madhyadesha). What is interesting however is that the boundaries of madhyadesha as mentioned in the Brahmana literature do not match those of the Buddhist literature. The Dharmasutra of Baudhayana describes it as lying to the east of the area where the river Saraswati disappears, to the west of the Kalakavana (Black forest), a forest near Allahabad, to the north of the Paripatra (the Satpuras ranges in Madhya Pradesh) and south of the Himalayas. This notion of the madhyadesha is found in the Manusmriti too. Many of the Puranas believed to have been written around the fifth-sixth centuries follow the division of space defined by the Dharmastra literature. This definition of the madhyadesha excluded areas east of Allahabad from its ambit. This would mean that Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Bengal were not considered part of the madhyadesha. Thus, cities like Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vaishali or Pataliputra were believed to be located beyond the madhyadesha. The Buddha spent his life preaching in areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The four places of pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition – Kapilavastu, Bodh Gaya, Saranath and Kusinagara, were in areas that were considered impure lands in the Brahmana tradition.
The majjhimadesa (madhyadesha) of the Buddhist texts includes areas that were closely linked to the life of the Buddha. In the Mahavagga the eastern boundary of madhyadesha is said to have extended up to the town of Kajangala (near Bhagalpur, Bihar). The mahajanapadas of Kasi, Kosala, Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Malla, Chetiya and Vatsa, areas beyond the boundaries of the Brahmanical madhyadesha, were part of the Buddhist conception of the madhyadesha. The madhyadesha was the cultural unit that was the focus of attention for the writers after the sixth century BCE. It was the larger world in which most of the mahajanapadas were located. The writers saw a unity in this large geographical unit. They perceived some form of connectedness that underlay the individual histories of different regions. Texts repeatedly mention movement of merchants, warriors and preachers from one city to another. This suggests a situation of contact and communication.

12.3.2 The Mahajanapada

The Buddhist literature repeatedly refers to a unit of settlement called the mahajanapada. Kings of some of the janapadas conquered the territories of neighbouring communities and kingdoms. Their large size and the presence of cities in the mahajanapadas distinguished them from the janapadas of the earlier period. The Buddhist literature refers to sixteen mahajanapadas spread over the Jambudipa. The famous mahajanapadas were those of Magadha, Kasi, Kosala, Vajji, Vatsa and Avanti. Each of them were ruled from a political centre inhabited by kings, officials, traders and crafts persons.
Boundaries of the *mahajanapadas* cannot be carefully worked out. They were frontiers created by rivers, hills, jungles and unconquered communities. These large untamed spaces separated the *mahajanapadas* from each other.

Within the world of *mahajanapadas* were located cities, towns, villages, forests and the entire panoply of the Indian civilisation. The capital of Kosala was Sravasti. Kosala, probably the most important *mahajanapada* in the time of the Buddha contained many other cities like Saketa, Ayodhya, Setavya and Ukkattha.

![Map 12.2: The Mahajanapadas](image)

**12.3.3 The Janapada**

The *janapada* as a unit of settlement is mentioned in the later Vedic literature. It emerged in a phase of history when cities had not come into existence. *Janapadas* consisted of many villages of agriculturists and pastoral nomads. Large parts of *janapadas* were covered by forests, since foraging was an important activity of the people. In the early phase many of the *janapadas* were ruled by Kshatriya lineages. That is why they were named after the dominant Kshatriya lineages like Kuru, Panchala, Kekeya, Madra and Matsya. Explaining a grammatical rule Patanjali says that subordinate groups of the *janapadas* are not included in naming the *janapadas*. This is a reflection of the fact that the *janapadas* were homes to a variety of groups that had been subordinated by the dominant groups. These names of *janapadas* continued to be used even after the dominant Kshatriya groups were conquered by other kings and rulers. Many *janapadas* like those of Magadha, Vajji (Vaishali) or Avanti were not named after Kshatriya lineages. Dominant groups in these *janapadas* had different origins. Texts like the *Dighanikaya* dated to the subsequent period mention the presence of villages, market towns and cities in the *janapadas*. 
The Arthashastra defines janapada as the territory that is agriculturally fertile, with mines, forests and pastures, with dedicated farmers who with the traders are capable of bearing the burden of taxes. Texts of the later period use the word janapada and mahajanapada interchangeably. Within the janapada were to be found different kinds of settlements. For example Patanjali in his Mahabhashya says that grama, ghosha, nagara and samvaha were units of settlement inside the janapadas.

12.3.4 The City

Cities emerged as the most celebrated and visible forms of settlement in the sixth century BCE. The Brahman Dharmashastra texts asked pious people to avoid visiting cities because of the dust and perpetual non recital of the Vedas. The Buddha on the other hand spent most of his time in cities. Buddhism has been called a response to urban misery. Cities were praised or censored by different traditions but nobody could be indifferent to them. Cities like Taxila, Pataliputra, Rajagriha, Shravasti, Kashi, Kaushambi and Ujjain dominate the landscape of the sixth-third century BCE. Different expressions are used for urban centres. The most popular words are pura, puri, nagara and mahanagara. Other words like pattana, putabhedana, sthaniya and nigama are also used. This kind of variety of words shows variations in space and time to denote this new kind of settlement. Some of these words also referred to the size and primary activity of a settlement.

In the Vedic literature the word pura meant a ‘fort’ or a ‘stronghold’ but did not have any relationship to a city. Such centres might have denoted the headquarters of Kshatriya lineages. For example Hastinapura was the centre of the Kuru janapada. In the sixth century BCE its connotation as a defensive stronghold fell in disuse and it simply meant an urban centre.

Figure 12.1: A City under Seize, Photograph from Sanchi, M.P.

Nagara is the word used most commonly for a city in the Sanskrit and Pali literature. The word pattana is used by writers like Kalidasa to denote a city particularly one of commercial character. The literal meaning of the word sthaniya is ‘a place to stay at’. The Arthashastra says that a sthaniya should be located at the centre of eight hundred villages and could sometimes serve as the capital.

The word puta-bhedana has been used for Pataliputara in the Mahaparinirvanasutta. It referred to ‘the distribution centre of parcels of merchandise of many kinds’. This was a new kind of settlement where the focus was not on cultivation or manufacture. It was simply acting as a centre where merchant goods arrived from different quarters to
be re-packaged for distribution in smaller centres. Such a specialized activity was possible only in the context of the emergence of trade networks. The word *nigama* referred to a market town. That is why in the Sanskrit language the word 'naigama' means a 'merchant'.

The *Arthashastra* mentions other categories of settlements too. The *dronamukha* was to be located at the centre of four hundred villages, the *kharvatika* of two hundred villages and the *samgrahana* of ten villages. These seem to be units co-ordinating the functions of many villages. The *Arthashastra* also refers to the *durga*. *Durga* is usually translated as a fort. However, the *Arthashastra* description indicates that it was the royal city. The king’s palace was meant to be located in its centre. Roads connected it with areas inhabited by Brahmanas, merchants and workers. The *Manusmriti* speaks of *durgas* that could be located in waters, deserts, forests and hills. The king was to establish his citadel (*pura*) in such a *durga*. It was to be replenished with weapons, wealth, food, water and vehicles. References to these units of settlement in other literary sources indicate that a variety of settlements had emerged with the coming of the city.

Names of many cities suggest a new attitude to space. The Buddhist text *Papanca-sudani* explains the meaning of the word Shravasti (Savathi; *sabbamatthi* – where everything is available). The Buddhist literature abounds in details about the wealth and prosperity of Savatthi. Buddha gave the largest number of sermons in Savatthi. Anathapindika, the merchant who bought the Jetavana for the construction of a vihara was a resident of Savatthi. So was Visakha Migarmata who gave liberal donations to the Buddhist *sangha*. Girivraja (pasture surrounded by hills), the capital of Magadha was renamed Rajagriha (home of the king). Ujjayini the capital of Avanti in Madhya Pradesh meant ‘the victorious one’. *Ayodhya* meant ‘unconquerable’. These names can be understood in the context of the emergence of powerful kingdoms and prosperous cities.

Urban centres were believed to be large settlements. For example the city of Kashi was said to have spread over an area of 12 *yojanas* according to a *Jataka* story. The city of Mithila and Indapatta covered seven *yojanas*. A Buddhist text says that Vaishali the capital of the Vajji confederacy had 7707 storied buildings, 7707 pinnacled buildings, 7707 *aramas*, 7707 lotus ponds. All these statements about the size of settlements might be exaggerations as archaeological evidences do not support them. However, they display an awareness about cities as built spaces that covered larger areas than villages.

Merchants travelling from Anga to Sindhu-Sauviradesha (both sides of the lower Indus) are mentioned in the Buddhist texts. The *Jataka* stories provide graphic descriptions of contact and communication among communities. Boat rides, cart rides, endless journeys on foot, battles, marriages and a thousand other forms of contact among the people of the *mahajanapadas*. Banaras, Savatthi and Taxila were connected not only by networks of trade but also by exchange of knowledge. There are repeated references to Buddha’s physician Jivaka who travelled from Rajagriha to Taxila to learn medication. The *Susima Jataka* tells us about a youth who travelled from Benaras to Taxila to learn the ‘hatthisutta’. Similarly, the famous story of the disciples of Bavari who travelled from the banks of the Godavari in the *dakkhinapatha* to Pratishthana, Ujjain, Vidisha and Shravasti conveys an image of connectedness. The ceaseless wanderings of the Buddha and his injunctions to the monks that they should lead a peripatetic life is in tune with the new world that had emerged where people could turn full time travellers.

### 12.4 SPACES AROUND THE CITY

City as a delimited zone meant that there was a concern for what existed outside the high walls of the city. Several terms like *nagara-bahya* (outside the city), *puropakantha* (near the city) and *nagaropanta* (near the border of the city) are used in early historic
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texts. Cremation grounds were located outside the city. Normative texts insist that cremation grounds must be located outside the city. They were also used for the execution of convicts. The Arthashastra says that Chandalas and heretics were to stay near the cremation ground. Fa Xian and Xuan Zang noticed the fact that Chandalas lived outside the city near cremation grounds. The location of Chandalas on the periphery of cities was the result of a set of decisions taken by the ruling minority located in the city. It was a deliberate location, or relocation within a space defined by the powerful. It was not as if there was a shortage of space in the city; rather, the presence of a certain number of people (outcastes) outside the boundaries of the city reflects the spatial projection of control exercised by the powerful. Our assertion is supported by the Jataka story that mentions how the king of Vedeha in anticipation of an invasion

...removed outside, all the poor people who lived in the city, and he brought from all the kingdom, the countryside, and the suburb villages, and settled within the city the rich families of the powerful (Jataka No. 546).

There are references to outcaste-prostitutes living outside the city. Buddhism and Jainism had a long tradition of establishing viharas outside the city. References in literary works like the Mrichchatatika show that viharas were located beyond the boundaries of the city. Many establishments of the brahmana tradition too were located beyond the city walls. In the subsequent period many temples were located outside the city. Individual ascetics had their ashramas outside the city. In fact the Arthashastra lays down a rule saying that places of worship and pilgrimage shall be constructed at a certain distance from the city. Denizens might have left the city but the city had not left them. Their social world was intimately connected with the happenings in the city. The process of urbanisation seems to witness an increase in the number of untouchable caste groups. Monks and ascetics depended on the patronage of the urbanites for their survival.

The urban periphery had another function. It was the space for pleasure gardens. Rivers and streams were the sites of secret rendezvous. Artificially created groves and gardens like udyana, upavana and pura-kanana were spots of leisure and sports for the urban rich. They could be ornamented with seats, pavilions, artificial hillocks, and artificial tanks.

The emergence of urbanism had not only transformed the physical space inside the city, it had modified the space in the surrounding areas too. This process of change is reflected in the social space too. Kings, merchants and priests were products of the same process as the untouchable castes. Beyond the penumbra of the city were located villages of different kinds. They escaped modifications in physical shape, but they too were caught in the web of urbanism.

12.4.1 The Village

The word grama is frequently used to describe villages. It was used in the earlier period too. However, by the third second century BCE its meaning was fixed to denote agricultural settlements. Literature refers to a variety of villages. In the Jataka literature there are references to villages of carpenters, weavers, smiths, potters, hunters, thieves, brahmans and outcaste Chandalas.

Villages consisted of households of agriculturists. The Jatakas refer to villages having thirty to a thousand households. The Vinaya-Pitaka says that a village could consist of one or two hutments too. The Arthashastra is concerned with production and its appropriation by the king. While it tends to treat producers as an organised whole, it does not gloss over differences among communities. It says that dancers, performers and musicians should not be allowed entry into villages lest they disturb the rural folk who are helpless and should be busy in the fields. For the first time, rural folk are mentioned as helpless and gullible.
The word *grama* increasingly meant peasant villages. By the third-fourth century peasant villages were further classified into *brahmadeya*, *agrahara* or *mangalam* villages. These words signified different patterns of control in these villages. These were villages where agriculture was the primary activity and a part of the produce was taken away by the king. However, there were other kinds of *gramas* too. In the *Jataka* literature there are references to *pratyantagama*. There are also references to *palli* – a term used to denote a small tribal or pastoral village.

### 12.4.2 Ghosha

Villages of pastoralist are also mentioned as *ghosha*. For example the playwright Bhasa in his *Balacharita* describes Vasudeva’s journey with baby Krishna from Mathura to Vrindavana. When he exited through the gateway of Mathura and crossed the river Yamuna he could hear mooing of the cows. The mooing indicated that a *ghosha* was close by. It consisted of a number of huts. Compared to the statist brahmana society the cultural traditions and practices of the pastoral nomadic communities were far more open in terms of equality of status and practices of marriage and kinship.

### 12.4.3 Forest

The *Arthashastra* suggests that agricultural land was surrounded by pastures which in turn was surrounded by wilderness (*aranya*) inhabited by ascetics. Wilderness was surrounded by different kinds of forests (*vana*). These forests were also classified in terms of the kind of animals and human communities that lived there. The *Arthashastra*’s contrast between the *aranya* and the *vana* is significant. *Aranya* referred to the land beyond the pastures inhabited by ascetics. This would have ensured regular contact between the communities of the agriculturists and brahmana – *shramana* groups that resided in the *aranya*. The *vana* on the other hand was the area beyond wilderness. There were forests that had been tamed for the requirements of the king and there were
untamed forests inhabited by elephants and wild animals. This was the landscape peopled by trappers, Shabaras, Pulindas, Chandalas and other forest-dwellers. The eye of power scanned areas beyond the town, the country and the wilderness. It began to assimilate communities of foragers. This signalled the gradual conquest of the jungle. With active encouragement from state administration agriculturists nibbled at other kinds of settlements. Shreni groups, chiefs and peasants tried to extend cultivation in the areas of surrounding pastoral nomadic communities. While agriculturists were nibbling at the space belonging to pastures, shepherds were entering the less densely forested wilderness (aranya) surrounding the pastures.

Figure 12.3: Prince Vessantara in Forest (1) Photograph from Sanchi, M.P.

Figure 12.4: Prince Vessantara in Forest (2) Photograph from Sanchi, M.P.
The *grama* and the *aranya* were not simply opposite poles of habitation pattern, they complemented each other too. Agriculturists needed the forest for grazing ground, as a source of new land, manpower and forest products. The forest also acted as a link between settled areas and as a refuge for rebels and recluses. For the inhabitants of forests, agricultural communities were a source of agricultural products, cattle and employment as agricultural labour and/or in a military capacity. Thus, for the people of the *grama*, the forest was not only the abode of the *rakshasas*, it was also a place to be conquered.

Forest as a unit of space was ever present in the consciousness of the early Indians. In the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and many other works of literature, the city and the forest represent frame of exile and kingdom. Forest has two contrasting images. It was the home of *Kiratas*, *Shabaras*, *Vaghurikas* and many forest groups. They used to loot and maraud adjoining villages. In the Buddhist canons there are provisions for suspension of religious performances in case of attacks by forest tribes. Asoka Maurya warned the forest communities to desist from marauding his kingdom. Forest was present in the consciousness of people also because urban centres were hubs of long distance trade. Traders had to pass through forested regions in their long journeys.

The *Jataka* texts contain many stories of these encounters. Forest was believed to be the abode of *rakshasas*, *yakshas* and a variety of ghouls and demons. In texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* the *rakshasas* are to be found everywhere and they move at will. It indicates a time when forests were not very far away from cities and villages. The characterisation of the *rakshasas* also indicates that they were not subject to state structure. The more fluid social organisation found in foraging societies seems to inform their social organisation. Forest was the zone that was beyond the control of cities. However, texts like the *Arthasastra* show an attempt to bring it within the ambit of king’s power. The other image of the forest was that it was the home of ascetics in the brahmana and Buddhist traditions. As such forest was the home of spirituality and other worldliness.

### 12.5 SUMMARY

The study of urban centres and other types of spaces reveals important facets of history. In the pre-urban phase the differentiation was primarily between the *grama* and *aranya*. After the sixth century BCE city emerged as a new form of settlement. Literature of this period refers to a variety of forests, villages and cities. The differentiation among settlements was a result of human action. This is obvious from the descriptions of people who were forced to live outside the city.

### 12.6 EXERCISES

1) What was the perception of the forest in the early Indian literature?

2) How were the villages of the sixth century BCE different from those of the earlier period?

3) Describe the relationship between the forest and the village.

4) Describe the units of settlement in the period before the onset of urbanism.

5) What were the differences between the *janapadas* of the pre-urban phase and the *mahajanapadas*?

6) Discuss the significance of the differences in the meanings of terms used for denoting cities.
7) What is the significance of the presence of categories like *nagarabhya, puropakantha, nagaropanta* in the early Indian texts?

8) What were the differences between cities and villages according to the early Indian texts?

12.7 REFERENCES


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