



RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AMONG THE ZEME TRIBES OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the processes and socio-cultural consequences of religious conversion among the Zeme tribes of Manipur, with a specific focus on Ze Mnui village in Senapati district of Manipur. Christianity first reached the village in 1976 marking a turning point in its story opening a new path for the community. Today, the village is approximately 80% Christian, while a portion of the population holds continue preserving its traditional beliefs. Historically rooted in an animistic belief system characterized by ancestor worship, ritual practices, and nature-based ceremonies, the Zeme of Ze Mnui (also Known as Yangkhullen) community underwent significant transformation following the introduction of Christianity, marked by the first documented conversion in 1976. Using a descriptive research approach and a purposive sample of 40 respondents aged 30 and above, the study explores the motivations behind conversion and the subsequent changes in social structure, leadership patterns, gender roles, educational aspirations, and ritual practices. Data collected through interviews, group discussions, field observations, and oral histories indicate that access to education, mission-based schooling, personal spiritual conviction, and socio-economic aspirations were the primary drivers of conversion. The findings reveal a decline and modification of traditional rituals, increased participation in church- centred activities, and the emergence of new forms of community identity, while linguistic continuity remains largely intact. Overall, the study demonstrates that Christian conversion reshaped the socio-cultural fabric of the Zeme tribes through a gradual, multi-generational process of adaptation and transformation.

Keywords: Religious Conversion, Social Transformation, Zeme Tribes, Christianity, Tribal Culture, Northeast India



1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of religious conversion in tribal communities across Northeast India has been both transformative and complex, and the Zeme tribes of Manipur represent an important example of this socio-cultural change. Traditionally, the Zeme community practiced an animistic belief system rooted in ancestor worship, nature-related rituals, and a well-defined structure of customary practices. These indigenous religious traditions were deeply connected to agricultural cycles, social relationships, and clan-based governance. For generations, rituals, festivals, and community ceremonies shaped identity, moral conduct, and the everyday rhythm of life. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries in the region introduced new forms of knowledge, values, and social institutions, steadily influencing the worldview of the Zeme people.

As missionary activity spread, particularly through education and health initiatives, the Zeme community began experiencing gradual cultural and social shifts. Mission schools created opportunities for literacy and modern learning, exposing younger generations to new ideas and aspirations beyond their traditional environment. Biblical teachings, institutional worship, and the organizational structure of the church introduced unfamiliar yet appealing forms of religious and social life. These changes laid the groundwork for a slow but significant transition in religious identity, shaping how the Zeme tribes viewed themselves in a rapidly evolving world. The influence of colonial forces, inter-tribal interaction, and the broader processes of modernization further contributed to this transformation.

The conversion to Christianity brought with it both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, many traditional practices began to fade, as elaborate rituals, animistic ceremonies, and indigenous knowledge systems gradually lost their central place in society. Some cultural elements became weakened or discontinued. On the other hand, certain practices were reinterpreted or adapted into the Christian context, leading to new forms of cultural hybridity and continuity. Christianity introduced organized systems of worship, new community roles, and values such as equality, compassion, and collective responsibility. These changes reshaped leadership structures, redefined gender roles, and encouraged new socio-economic aspirations. In many ways, conversion contributed to increased access to education, broader social mobility, and more structured community life.



Despite the major influence of Christianity, there remains a significant lack of specialized scholarly work focusing specifically on the Zeme tribes of Manipur. Although general studies on Naga tribes or Northeast Indian tribal communities exist, the distinct experiences, motivations, and socio-cultural transformations of the Zeme tribe have not been adequately documented. This gap highlights the need for a detailed examination that goes beyond general narratives and focuses on the unique historical and cultural processes shaping this community.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the historical background of the Zeme tribe, understand the factors that motivated conversion, and analyze the various dimensions of social change that followed. Through both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research seeks to determine how religious conversion has impacted the contemporary socio-cultural, economic, and political structures of the Zeme tribes. In doing so, the study not only documents the sequence of cultural transformation but also examines how traditional belief systems, social norms, and community relationships have evolved in response to new religious influences. By integrating field observations, respondent views, and statistical findings, the research provides a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of the Zeme community. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious transformation shapes identity, redefines community dynamics, alters leadership patterns, and affects cultural continuity and adaptation in indigenous societies. It highlights the complexity of conversion not merely as a shift in faith, but as an ongoing process that influences every aspect of community life, from social organization and cultural expression to aspirations for development and modernity.

1.1. Historical Background and Patterns of Religious Conversion among the Zeme Tribes

Christianity began to take root in Ze Mnui village in 1976 with the arrival of Baptist faith later by the Roman Catholic mission in the 1978 respectively, marking a significant turning point in the community's religious, social, and cultural landscape. The introduction of Christian teachings, which emphasized compassion, equality, and communal fellowship, slowly began reshaping the worldview of village residents. Mission education played an important role, as it exposed children and youth to literacy, formal learning, and new forms of social organization. Church gatherings, Bible study groups, and youth fellowships created platforms for interaction and encouraged community members to participate in collective worship and shared activities. These changes were further strengthened through relationships with nearby Christian villages,

where people witnessed the social benefits of education, improved health practices, and simplified rituals.

With the visible transformations within the community, many began to view Christianity as a path toward greater social progress and stability. Its straightforward worship practices stood in contrast to traditional rituals, which were often elaborate, time-consuming, and required significant material resources. Over the years, increasing numbers of households adopted the Christian faith, leading to the gradual transformation of community life. Festivals shifted toward church-centered celebrations, and leadership roles increasingly emerged from church structures, influencing decision-making and conflict resolution within the village.

By the late twentieth century, Christianity had become the dominant faith in Ze Mnui village, with nearly 80% of the population embracing it. This widespread acceptance not only shaped religious practices but also encouraged new aspirations related to education, employment, gender roles, and community development. While traditional customs and cultural identity continue to hold significance, the growth of Christianity since 1976 has played a central role in defining the modern identity, social organization, and future-oriented outlook of within the community

1.2. Research Objectives

- To test the historical background and processes of religious conversion of the Zeme tribes of Manipur.
- To examine the socio-cultural changes that have taken place in Zeme society after the introduction of Christianity such as the change in customs, rituals and practices within the community.
- To determine effects of religious conversion on social set up, leadership, gender role, education and economic patterns of the Zeme tribes.
- To determine the relationship between religious conversion and contemporary social identity and development among the Zeme community, and their perceptions, experiences and responses towards it.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Singh (2019), in his work *Zeliangrong Religion in North East India: Dynamics of Amalgamated Collective Identity of Three Cognate Tribes*, examined the cultural and religious

foundations of the Zeliangrong community and analyzed how indigenous belief systems shaped collective identity. His study, published in *The Eastern Anthropologist*, focused on the close relationship between tribal cosmology, ritual practices, and territorial identity, demonstrating how traditional religion functioned as both a spiritual framework and a social regulatory mechanism. Singh also discussed the gradual transformations brought about by colonial contact, missionary activity, and modernization, highlighting how these external forces initiated subtle yet significant shifts in the native religious structure.

Dangmei (2021), in an article published in the *International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, explored indigenous religious life and internal cultural reforms in Northeast India. Her work emphasized that cultural change did not begin solely with external influences but emerged from within the tribal communities themselves through social needs, inter-tribal interactions, and the desire to maintain harmony. She observed how traditional belief systems underwent adaptations even before the arrival of missionaries and later documented how colonial encounters and Christian teachings accelerated ongoing reforms. Her study highlighted the re-shaping of native rituals and festivals as communities adjusted to evolving socio-political realities.

Thanmung (2015), in his article *Christianity and Social Change among the Naga Tribes of Manipur* published in *Language in India*, analysed the social transformation that accompanied the spread of Christianity among the Naga groups. His work detailed how Christian teachings influenced community structures, education, gender roles, and leadership patterns. He emphasized that conversion brought both positive changes—such as literacy, modern education, and new moral frameworks—and disruptions, including the decline of traditional rituals. Through qualitative accounts, his study illustrated how Christianity became an instrument of modernization, reshaping cultural practices and collective identity among the Nagas.

Pachau (2024), in his publication *Forging Identities Between Two Cultures: Conversion to Hinduism and Christianity in Northeast India* from the *International Journal of Asian Christianity*, investigated how religious conversion contributed to new identity formations in post-conversion communities. His research showed that conversion was not merely a shift in belief but a negotiation between indigenous traditions and new religious systems, resulting in



hybrid cultural identities. He demonstrated how socio-political factors—such as education, prestige, social mobility, and political affiliations—played central roles in influencing religious choices. His study further highlighted the tensions and adjustments experienced by individuals navigating between traditional expectations and Christian or Hindu value systems, ultimately illustrating how communities redefined their place in the wider socio-cultural landscape.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research of religious conversion and social transformation in the tribes of Zeme in Manipur assumed a descriptive survey research method to critically analyze the historical, social, and cultural aspects of conversion. Purposive sampling was used to sample 40 respondents so that most gender, age, and educational backgrounds were represented, and respondents whose family members have been converted to their religion were sampled. Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and oral histories. To provide the trend of demographic features, conversion patterns, motivations and social changes, the obtained data were processed with the help of descriptive statistical methods (frequency, percentages) to introduce the trends in demographic aspects. The ethics including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly followed in the study. In general, the research approach was a thorough and methodological way to comprehend the complex issues of the effects of religious conversion on Zeme community.

3.1. Research Design

The current research took the descriptive survey research design in order to study the historical context, mechanisms and the socio-cultural effects of the religious conversion in the Zeme tribes of Manipur. It was thought that the design was suitable because it enabled systematic gathering, analysis, and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data that dealt with religious change, social transformation and the perceptions of the communities.

3.2. Population and Sample

The study population consisted exclusively of adult members of Ze Mnuui Village who were 30 years of age and above, as this age group possesses adequate lived experience to comment on pre-conversion and post-conversion social changes. A purposive sample of 40 respondents was

selected based on availability, willingness, and direct family experience with Christian conversion.

3.3.Data Collection Instrument

The study did not use any structured questionnaire. Instead, primary data were collected through:

- semi-structured interviews
- informal and formal group discussions
- field observations
- oral histories from elders

Secondary data were drawn from books, articles, church records, and documented village narratives.

3.4.Data Collection Procedure

The researcher personally conducted interviews and group discussions within Ze Mnui village. Respondents were informed of the objectives, and verbal consent was obtained. Field observations were recorded in notebooks, and oral histories were documented through narrative accounts. Secondary sources such as church archives, tribal history texts, and academic literature were consulted to support the primary findings.

3.5.Variables of the Study

- Independent Variable: Religious conversion (when/at what stage, cause of conversion)
- Dependent Variables: Socio-cultural transformation (shift in rituals, community involvement, leadership, gender roles, education and economic activities).
- Control Variables: Education, age and gender of respondents.

3.6.Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and discussion notes were categorized into themes such as historical conversion experience, cultural change, ritual transformation, church influence, language retention, and community identity. When

necessary, simple descriptive tallies (e.g., number of participants mentioning each theme) were used to support interpretive analysis.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The demographic profile of the 40 respondents (all aged 30 years and above) shows a balanced and mature representation of participants from Ze Mnui village. The largest age group is 30–35 years (30%), followed by 36–40 years (25%) and 41–50 years (20%), indicating that a majority of respondents are in their active working and socially engaged age.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Age Group	30–35 years	12	30.0%
	36–40 years	10	25.0%
	41–50 years	8	20.0%
	51–60 years	6	15.0%
	60+ years	4	10.0%
Gender	Male	22	55.0%
	Female	18	45.0%
Education	No formal schooling	6	15.0%
	Primary	8	20.0%
	Secondary	12	30.0%
	Higher secondary	8	20.0%
	Graduate & above	6	15.0%

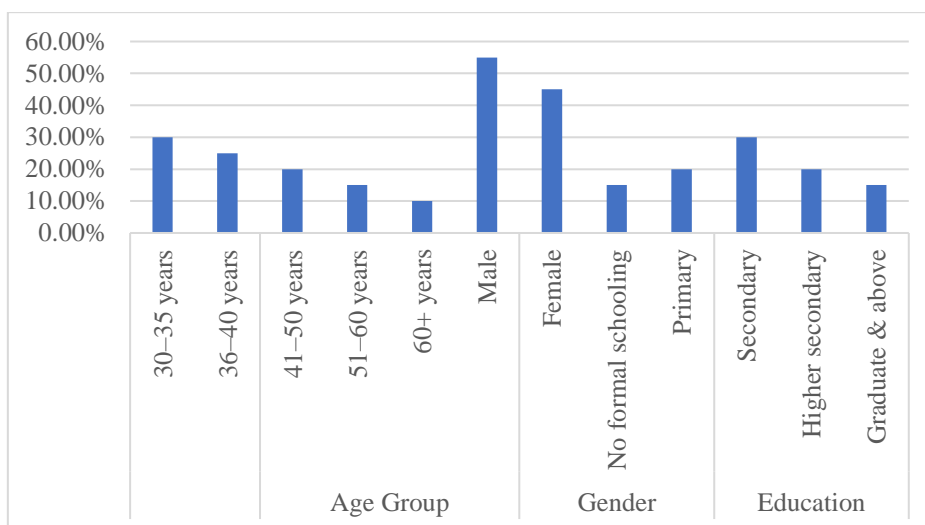


Figure 1: Graphical Representation on the percentage of Demographic profile

A smaller proportion belongs to the 51–60 years (15%) and 60+ years (10%) categories, reflecting the inclusion of elder community members who possess deeper historical and cultural knowledge. Gender distribution is nearly balanced, with males constituting 55% and females 45%, ensuring that perspectives from both groups are adequately represented. In terms of educational attainment, 30% of respondents completed secondary education, while 20% each attained primary and higher secondary levels, and 15% are graduates or above. Another 15% have no formal schooling, which is typical of rural tribal contexts. Overall, the demographic data demonstrates a well-rounded sample with a mix of age, gender, and education profiles suitable for understanding religious conversion and social transformation in the community.

Table 2 — Timing / phase of conversion in family

Conversion Phase	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
1976–1990	8	20%
1991–2010	14	35%
2011–present	18	45%
Total	40	100%

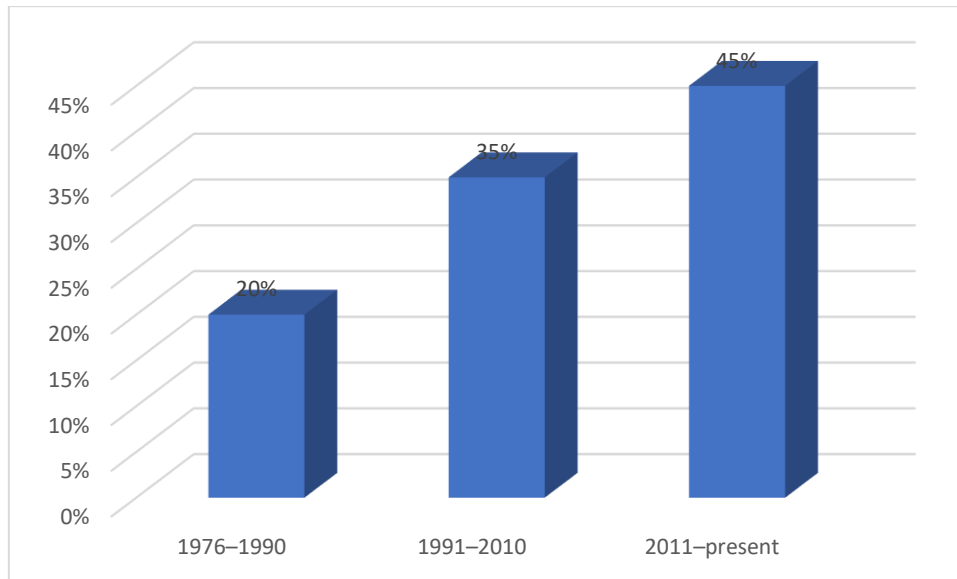


Figure 2: Graphical Representation on the percentage of Conversion Phase

Table 2 shows a clear and gradual growth in Christian conversion in Ze Mnui village over several decades. Only 20% of respondents reported that their families converted during the initial phase from 1976 to 1990, indicating that Christianity spread slowly in the early years, with only a few families adopting the new faith. Between 1991 and 2010, conversions increased to 35%, reflecting a stronger acceptance as villagers became more exposed to Christian education, inter-village interactions, and changing socio-economic aspirations. The most significant rise occurred from 2011 to the present, where 45% of respondents reported conversion during this period, showing that Christianity gained its strongest momentum in recent years. This sharp increase suggests that modern influences, expanding church activities, youth involvement, and shifting community values have played a key role in accelerating religious transformation in the village. Overall, the trend indicates that while early adoption was slow, Christianity has become increasingly prominent in the village over time, particularly in the last decade.

Table 3: Primary reason for conversion

Reason	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Access to education / mission schools	14	35.00%
Health/medical services	5	12.50%
Marriage / interfaith marriage	4	10.00%
Social status / community prestige	6	15.00%
Personal spiritual conviction	9	22.50%
Others (peer influence, employment)	2	5.00%
Total	40	100%

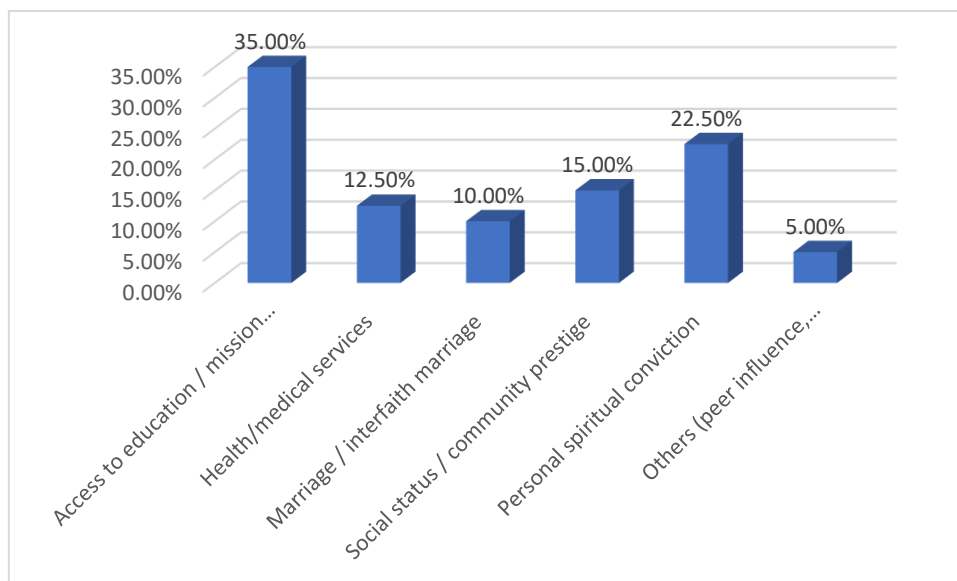


Figure 3: Graphical Representation on the percentage of Reason

Table 3 highlights the primary reasons that influenced families in Ze Mnui village to convert to Christianity. The most significant factor was access to education and mission schools, reported by 35% of respondents, showing that educational opportunities offered by missionaries played a central role in motivating conversion. Personal spiritual conviction was the second most influential factor at 22.5%, indicating that many

individuals were drawn to Christianity through personal faith experiences and religious appeal. Social status and community prestige accounted for 15%, suggesting that aligning with the Christian community was perceived as beneficial for social mobility and recognition. Practical benefits such as health and medical services contributed to 12.5% of conversions, reflecting the value placed on improved well-being and healthcare support. Marriage or interfaith marriage influenced 10% of respondents, showing that family and relational networks also facilitated religious change. A smaller portion (5%) cited other factors such as peer influence and employment opportunities. Overall, the table indicates that both practical benefits—mainly education and healthcare—and spiritual conviction jointly shaped the conversion decisions of the community.

Table 4 — Observed socio-cultural changes after conversion

Change Indicator	Yes (f, %)	No (f, %)
Traditional rituals declined or discontinued	28 (70.0%)	12 (30.0%)
Traditional rituals were modified/reinterpreted	24 (60.0%)	16 (40.0%)
Vernacular language use retained in daily life	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)
Increased participation in church/community groups	32 (80.0%)	8 (20.0%)

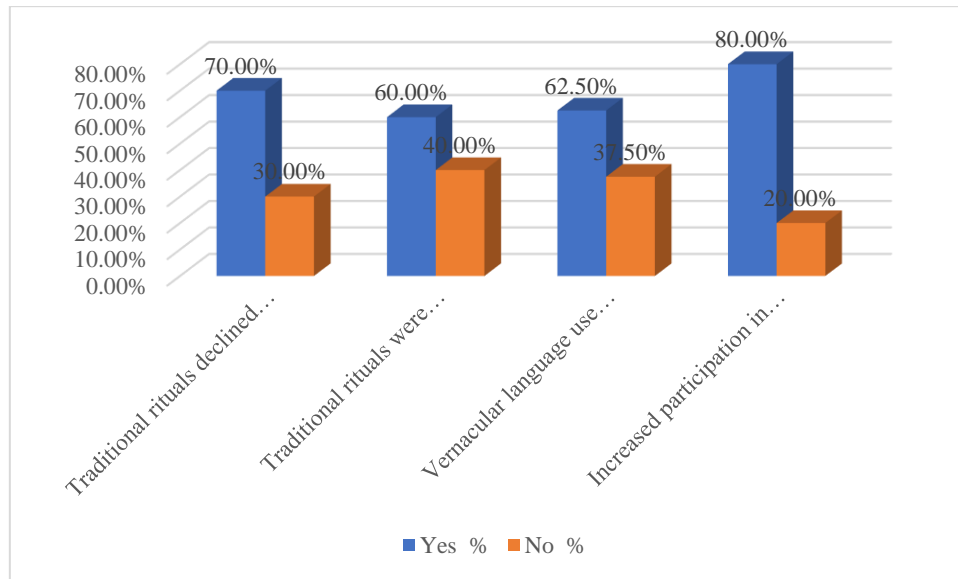


Figure 4: Graphical Representation on the percentage of Change Indicator

Table 4 clearly shows that religious conversion has brought significant socio-cultural changes within the community. A large majority of respondents (70%) reported that traditional rituals have either declined or been completely discontinued, indicating a major shift away from pre-conversion cultural practices. At the same time, 60% stated that traditional rituals were not entirely abandoned but were modified or reinterpreted, suggesting a process of cultural adaptation where some indigenous elements are incorporated within a Christian framework. Despite these changes, 62.5% affirmed that the vernacular language continues to be used in daily life, showing that linguistic identity has remained resilient even amidst religious transformation. The most prominent change is the sharp rise in church and community participation, reported by 80% of respondents, reflecting how Christianity has become a central institution that now shapes social interaction, community bonding, and collective identity. Overall, the data illustrates that conversion has resulted in both the decline of certain traditional practices and the strengthening of new religious community structures, while still allowing key elements of cultural identity such as language to remain intact.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the process of religious conversion in Ze Mnui village has resulted in both cultural challenges and meaningful positive transformations. On one hand, the shift toward Christianity has contributed to the decline of several traditional rituals, reduced the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge, and altered customary social practices that once shaped community identity. However, alongside these cultural changes, Christianity has also played a constructive role in the social development of the village by introducing modern education, improving literacy levels, and encouraging healthier and more organized forms of community living. The church has become a strong platform for cooperation, social bonding, and emotional support, especially during periods of hardship. It has also influenced progressive changes such as the empowerment of women, discouragement of harmful or costly ritual practices, and the promotion of values like equality, compassion, and collective responsibility. Moreover, Christian institutions have helped the community access new opportunities for social mobility, leadership participation, and spiritual guidance. Therefore, the impact of Christianity within the village cannot be viewed as solely positive or negative; rather, it represents a complex and ongoing transformation where cultural loss and cultural renewal coexist, shaping a new social identity that blends elements of tradition with modern aspirations.

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