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**The Concept
and
Functioning
of
Cooperative
Democracy**

P. E. WEERAMAN

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The Concept and Functioning of Cooperative Democracy

Paper presented by Mr. P.E. Weeraman, former ICA Regional Director for South-East Asia, at the Conference on "Cooperative Democracy" held by the National Cooperative Union of India at New Delhi, March 28-31, 1972

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P. E. Weeraman

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The Concept and Functioning of Cooperative Democracy

A cooperative institution at the primary level is an *association of persons* who have similar economic needs which they seek to satisfy better through a *common undertaking* than by individual means. This two-fold character of a cooperative forms the basis of the society's rules of organisation and operation. These lay down the *special relations* of the members among themselves and those between themselves and their society as well as the *economic relations* of each of the members with the common undertaking.

As a cooperative is not a grouping of capital but an association of persons the rule of, "one man, one vote" which is in accordance with the concept that all human beings are equal, is its fundamental rule in respect of all the social relations of the association. Each cooperative association is a democracy.



The existence of cooperatives depends on the legal recognition of the autonomy of the individual and of the family. The cooperative institution "presupposes free and responsible persons who, in full exercise of their autonomy, have voluntarily joined together". Individual autonomy and independence are thus the preconditions of common action through Cooperation. It is also the aim of this common action to preserve this individual freedom, both social and economic.

The common action of Cooperation is a reaction against the consequences of individualism but it does not suppress individual effort. On the contrary it evokes and encourages individual effort in the right direction "from competition in individualism to individuality in cooperation", in the words of Thomas Carlyle. The common action that results is based on "the free accord of individual wills". Cooperation requires "both individual effort of the cooperators and the union of their efforts, and it must bring these two factors into simultaneous and complementary action".

The aim of the common undertaking is to satisfy the need of the members. It follows that the source and exercise of power in respect of the common undertaking must lie with those whose needs gave birth to the undertaking. Thus Cooperation establishes the sovereignty of the individual person by locating "the origin and exercise of power at the very origin of needs: man then remains his own master, and the organisation is his servant", (Fauquet). The members must there-

fore remain in ultimate control of their undertaking. Hence the unequivocal acceptance by the twenty-fourth ICA Congress (Hamburg 1969) of the submission made by Messrs Kerinec (France) and Thedin (Sweden) in their joint paper that democracy is the very essence of Cooperation". This was echoed by Mr. Klimov of the USSR in the words "If this essence ceases to exist cooperation dies or is degenerated" and re-echoed by Prof. Lambert of Belgium. He said : "it is not many years, I think, since the majority of practising co-operators and theoreticians of cooperation would have affirmed that the dividend was the essence of Cooperation. Here we see a most welcome change of perspective, since it is obvious that democracy is the principle which best distinguishes us from any other economic and social system and that at the same time this principle offers the greatest hope for the future."

As said by Messrs Kerinec and Thedin, "Cooperation is not merely a means of attaining limited economic goals, it is not merely a type of economic undertaking or democratic organisation soundly rooted in everyday life and the common needs of its members. It is also a vision of the future. We refer to it because this vision of the future is intimately bound up with the vitality of cooperative democracy."

Cooperative democracies are homogeneous. They are "homogeneous not absolutely, but in relation to the function or functions assumed by the common undertaking". A direct relationship subsists between the objects of the common undertaking and the common

needs of the members which the common undertaking has to satisfy. There may be differences among the members but they arise "only in the search for the solutions best adapted to the ends pursued". Thus cooperative democracies are different from political democracies.

The principle of voluntary membership enjoins not only that a person who joins a cooperative should do so voluntarily in full exercise of his autonomy, but also that having joined the cooperative, the association of each member with the cooperative continues to be of his free will and the individual autonomy of the member remains unimpaired, except to the extent to which it has been restricted by certain internal disciplines "freely accepted by him in the interests of himself and all his fellow-members" (Fauquet). "It is a corollary of the principle of voluntary membership that the member should feel that he has a real responsibility for his society's good administration and achievements" (ICA Principles Commission). The democratic control of the cooperative by its members would be effective only if those who enjoy the right of democratic control are individually autonomous, as stated above. Otherwise the real control would vest in those who have control over the members as regards their social and economic relations with their society. This would vitiate the principle of democratic control, the justification of which "rests on the proposition that it is the members who know what their interests are". Therefore the principle of individual autonomy em-

bodied in the voluntary principle is a corollary of the principle of democratic control.

As cooperatives are voluntary associations of human beings, on a basis of equality for the solution of common economic problems, rendering an organised service in the interests of the whole community, it follows that the democratic control exercised by the members would be valid and acceptable to the outside world in proportion to the degree to which it represents the will of those who have the common economic problems which the society seeks to solve. The greater the number of such persons within the society the greater the sanction there would be from the public in general for the decisions made by the general body of the cooperative. Therefore the principle of "Open Membership" is as much a corollary of the principle of "democratic control" as is the principle of "voluntary membership."

In the context of cooperative democracy the principle of "open membership" is often misinterpreted to mean that cooperatives are obliged to enroll all persons who may apply to join them. But as said by the ICA Principles Commission "open membership has never meant that". Article 8 of the Rules of the ICA says that "Membership of a cooperative society shall be voluntary and available without artificial restriction or any social, political, racial or religious discrimination to *all persons who can make use of its services* and are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership."

The proper observance of the principle of "open membership" is essential for the observance of the principle of "democratic control". If anybody could join a cooperative irrespective of whether he needs its services or not, it would be very simple for anti-cooperative elements to come in by the "open" door and exercise the right of democratic control to vote the cooperative itself out of existence. I have been personally made aware of the likelihood of this situation developing in some cooperatives of certain country due to the indiscriminate admission of persons into their fold, in ignorance of the true meaning of the principle of open membership. A similar aberration from the principle of "open membership" is the selling of shares of cooperatives to the State, making it *ipso facto* a member of the cooperatives concerned. The State does not have the same needs as those of the individual members. Thus such enrolment of the State as a member of a cooperative is a violation of the principle of "open membership". Nor is the State in its capacity as a member prepared to submit to the internal discipline of the cooperative as laid down by its administrative organs. Moreover, as a member, the State has no right of its own to nominate any person to be a director of the cooperative even if it be to protect the interests of the State in respect of its shares in the cooperative for all members have only the same right in respect of directors namely to elect them by majority vote. As a member the State must tow to the principle of democratic control under which the status of all members is equal, a principle ensured "by

giving each member one vote and one only." This violation of the principle of open membership by certain cooperatives, no doubt misled by the laws passed in disregard or in ignorance of the cooperative principle, has changed the very character of such cooperatives. However, as said by Dr. Fauquet "cooperators can give their support to transitional forms intermediate between public action and cooperative action". The proper observance of "open membership" will ensure that the membership is constituted of only those who are entitled to be members. This is of prime importance again because the principle of "democratic control" rests on the axiom that "what the members' interests are in any given situation only they can finally determine." This justification would not be valid if the membership includes persons who are not entitled to be members as they do not have the common need which the society seeks to satisfy and so would not be motivated by the same reasons as the members who have the common need.

Thus the principle of democratic control which makes a cooperative a democratic organisation is dependent for its validity and effectiveness on the proper observance of the principle of voluntary and open membership.

The principle of cooperative democracy is set out in Article 8 of the Rules of the ICA as follows: Cooperative societies are democratic organisations. Their affairs shall be administered by persons elected or

appointed in a manner agreed by the members and accountable to them. Members of primary societies shall enjoy equal rights of voting (one member, one vote) and participation in decisions affecting their societies. In other than primary societies the administration shall be conducted on a democratic basis in a suitable form.

Democracy is the very essence of Cooperation for the reason that the cooperative would be failing in its purpose if the principle of democratic control were not observed. As said by the ICA Principles Commission, "the primary and dominant purpose of a cooperative society is to promote the interest of the membership". And what constitutes the interest of the membership is best determined by the members themselves. Thus it is essential that the cooperative society functions according to the will of the members if the cooperative is to fulfil its primary and dominant purpose of promoting the interest of its membership.

If the administrative organs of the cooperative are to embody the democratic principle, their development "must remain anchored to certain fundamental rules and assumptions which the Cooperative Movement has accepted from its very beginnings". "The cooperative society" says the ICA Principles Commission, "being primarily an association of human beings, the status of all its members should be equal and all should have equal opportunities of participating in decisions and expressing views on policy. There is no way of ensuring

this save by giving each member one vote and only one. Further since the Cooperative Movement exists in order to place the common people in effective control of the mechanism of modern economic life, it must give the individual (only too often reduced to the role of a cog in that mechanism) a chance to express himself, a voice in the affairs and destinies of his cooperative and scope to exercise his judgement". His sense of responsibility for his society's good administration would not be real if his voice in its affairs is not equal to that of every other member. Accordingly there can be no exception to the rule of one member one vote in primary cooperative societies.

It is necessary that the ideals of democracy are not relegated to the past, amidst the society's preoccupation with its day to day problems. Its very efficiency would be undermined for "efficiency is only to be measured in terms of the ideals it serves". This brings me to the second part of my subject—the functioning of cooperative democracy.

The least inattention to cooperative democracy will damage it and indifference to it will be fatal to it, as said by Messrs Kerinec and Thedin.

Inattention and indifference arise mainly out of a feeling among the members that their decisions are not implemented by the society's officers or officials. It arises also when the laws of the country nullify the very principles of Cooperation—in spite of being laws made to facilitate cooperative development. Laws which

vest the final decision in regard to certain financial and administrative matters in a government official and give powers to the government official to nominate directors and supersede boards of management, nay even to impose byelaws on the cooperative nullifying the very principles of cooperation, the presence of government officials as the executives of the society, all these tend to create inattention and indifference to the ideal of cooperative democracy. The legal limitations imposed on cooperative democracy are understood by the common man to be correct as the law is generally assumed to be correct. The inattention and indifference to cooperative principles shown by the law itself and by those whose function it is to be promoters and advisers of the movement, who but actually manage and control it, must surely permeate among the co-operators and even more among the public at large, in countries where the movement has been fostered by the government. This indifference all stems from the failure of the governments to recognise that fostering the cooperative movement means promoting democratic institutions based on cooperative principles. As said by the ICA Principles Commission, "in a fully developed cooperative unit management must rest in the hands of the members and all decisions must be taken by the cooperative themselves, with no external interference." "Autonomy" they added "is therefore a corollary of democracy". In the case of cooperatives which require guidance, the guides must first understand "the deeply democratic spirit of cooperation". As said by Messrs Kerinec and Thedin a principle has value only to the

extent to which it is respected where it is applied and to the extent it is accepted and understood by the men who apply it.

Governments often seek to lay down rules on matters that should be dealt with by the members themselves. To legislate to ensure the observance of cooperative principles is one thing but to lay down internal disciplines by law is another. Even provisions which are *per se* healthy for a cooperative society's internal management become regimentation when they are adopted by the members of their own free will, as their bylaws or working rules, they become internal disciplines of great moral value. Such internal disciplines result in material benefit as well, and so "by a single motion cooperation raises the people's standard materially as well as morally. If it failed in its moral task, it would also fail in its economic one" (Fauquet). When internal disciplines are laid down by the law of the land or any outside authority, they offend against the autonomy of the members and of the society. As has been pointed out, this autonomy is a corollary of cooperative democracy.

It is often averred that government control would be removed when the cooperatives become competent to manage their own affairs. It is a contradiction in terms to say this, because competence to manage their own affairs could be proved only when the government has withdrawn its control. As long as there is government control, the members cannot develop fully into

their own and become competent to manage their own affairs. "The very fact that there is close government supervision makes the members less vigilant and so this governmental supervision itself becomes a cause of a society's downfall". (Foreward to the Indian Edition of the Principles Commission Report). And, as said by Sir Malcolm Darling, "it is never easy to persuade those in authority that the time has come for withdrawal, still less easy to get employees to train others to take their place". Far from this one wonders whether a government, which has bought shares in a cooperative, will ever surrender its shares and recall its directorial nominees who followed in the wake of this participation in share capital.

As said by Dr. Bonow, President of the ICA, "it is absolutely essential that the long-term objective of making the cooperative movement an independent and autonomous one is kept constantly in mind. We would have mistaken the casket for the gem if we were to perpetuate an arrangement whereby the initiative and the democratic character of the cooperative movement would be impaired". He added: "In the ultimate analysis, it is the vitality of the people of a country which determines progress. Legislation, especially cooperative legislation, should provide the framework within which people's capacity to bring about the desired change is enhanced. If the net result of legislation is to thwart this tendency, I am afraid, we would have done more harm than good".

As noted by the ICA Congress at Zurich in 1946.

the State cannot do without the collaboration of cooperative institutions. As pointed out by Dr. Fauquet, cooperatives "draw their strength precisely from the quarters where State authority is reduced and attenuated by the time it reaches them". "And cooperation", he continues "even though it may at first have been oppressed or misunderstood, can respond to the appeal of the State which makes a reasonably moderate estimate of what it can effectively achieve by its own means. Cooperative organisations by virtue of their federal structure with its hierarchic arrangements of their elementary units, offer the State—if it cares to avail itself of them—a chain of relay stations between the centres which direct the economy and the depths of social life". The liaison so established would be a flexible one permitting any errors in the directives from above to be corrected and reduced to suit local conditions. Cooperation, thanks to its own virtues, "can thus be associated with a partially centralised economy of a reasonable kind".

The most authoritative guidance in regard to the role of government in cooperative development came from the ILO at its General Conference in 1966, from its Recommendation No. 127 under the title "Cooperatives (Developing Countries) Recommendation, 1966". The gist of this recommendation is that "governments should formulate and carry out a policy under which cooperatives receive aid and encouragement...without effect on their independence" and "such aid should not entail any obligations contrary to the independence

or interests of cooperatives and should be designed to encourage rather than replace the initiative and effort of the members”.

This recommendation has great relevance to the functioning of cooperative democracy in developing countries.

The inroads into cooperative democracy referred to earlier in this paper would have been terminated if the Recommendation had been taken seriously by the governments concerned.

Its representational framework and its machinery for member participation constitute the organisational aspect of cooperative democracy.

The highest authority of a cooperative is its General Assembly. Formerly all general meetings were gatherings of individual members, each with one vote. “Cooperatives everywhere” says the ICA Secretariat’s report to the Hamburg Congress, (1956) “have always found it difficult to retain the full vigour of their democratic base. In recent years, however, sweeping changes in cooperative structure have greatly increased the proportions of this problem”. “These changes in structure involve centralisation of resources, larger and more integrated operational units, standardisation, centralisation of services and management, and conformity to universally binding development plans”.

These changes have led to the transfer of authority from primary to apex organisations and “increasingly

decision-making is entrusted to an experienced and professional managerial elite at the centre of the movement". "This loss of sovereignty is none the less real for the fact that it is usually given up voluntarily in the interest of greater efficiency for the movement. Obligations once assumed are binding, and responsibility is permanently delegated to the centre". "The major effect, in the context of democracy, is to widen the gap between members and management, to remove decision-making from the local base which had long been considered the foundation of democratic control. This emasculation of democracy can and does manifest itself in various ways even sometimes in a blurring of the end purpose of Co-operation, namely to serve the interests of the members".

As a counter to the development of unwieldy and inefficient general assemblies, more and more societies have substituted indirect for direct representation and the *delegate general assembly* of members' representatives takes the place of the regular general meeting of members.

"The crucial issue" in the problem of democracy "is the division of responsibilities and authority as between elected committee and the management". The general principle that has evolved in this connection is that the elected committee is responsible for day-to-day operational decisions. Major policy decisions, relate to planning, public relations, member relations, relations with secondary organisations and long-term

commitments of facilities, finances or man-power. The day-to-day operational decisions are in respect of personnel, processing, production, purchasing, storage, marketing, retailing and employee relations. "The key requirement of democratic control is two-fold : (a) that the respective responsibilities of the elected committee and the management should be clearly differentiated, defined and understood by all concerned : (b) that the management should be fully accountable to the elected committee as the representatives of the membership but that the management should not be hampered in daily work by too much interference from the elected committee". (Kerinec and Thedin) "Non-professional advice should not be forced upon them. Democracy should consist in a policy where the guidelines of policy are first of all set down by elected bodies, but where the active decisions are left to the professional management" (A. Korp.)

It is being recognised more and more by cooperative movements that the managerial function should be entrusted to full-time professional people whilst the managerial bodies representative of the members are assigned "a more purely supervisory role".

As regards *representation at the secondary and higher levels of cooperative organisation*, the ICA Rule quoted above makes it clear that "in other than primary societies the administration shall be conducted *on a democratic basis* in a suitable form". As stated by the ICA Principles Commission the secondary and

tertiary organisations which are created by the cooperation of cooperative societies are themselves undoubtedly cooperative organisations, with the same obligation as the primary societies of conforming to the essential cooperative rules. "The members of secondary organisations have equal rights. This equality gives them the proper basis for democratic management. It is therefore consistent to apply the rule of *one member, one vote* to secondary organisations, including some of national dimension. It would appear to work satisfactorily in organisations *where there is no great disparity in size between their affiliated societies*".

"Another method, which unquestionably pays proper respect to the human factor, is to *base voting power upon the individual membership* of (affiliated) societies".

"A variant of this system is found where voting power may be *based on capital contributions which are themselves based on membership*.

"Another method is "to take account of the different *degrees of interest displayed* by the affiliated societies in their common organisation, as indicated, for example by their volume of purchases from it or of produce marketed through it".

The Commission concludes "It does not appear, however, that these departures from the strict rule of equality of persons have yet led anywhere to a distri-

buting and voting power radically different from that which would have been made on a membership basis, and, from a practical angle and in the light of experience, they may represent a necessary or desirable concession for the sake of unity, equality or efficiency or any combination of these”.

To my mind there is no doubt that “the strict rule of equality of persons” referred to in the foregoing paragraph is best adhered to, not by giving each affiliated society the same voting power at the secondary level, but by giving each affiliated society votes in proportion to its own individual membership. The purposes of democracy would be served best by this arrangement, for the voting power at the secondary level will reflect the strength of the human membership at the primary level. Democracy at the base enjoins *one man one vote* and so that larger the number of men the larger the number of votes. It would in fact be a negation of this basic right of human beings if at the secondary level a society representing even a membership of one million persons has only one vote, the same as what a society of ten would have. The secondary organisation should have votes in the tertiary in proportion to the total membership of its affiliated primary societies. Thus only will the basic cooperative rule of “one member one vote” be truly observed for at the primary level “*one member one vote*” means “*one man, one vote*” and in fact the rule is more often quoted as “one man one vote”.

This certainly is the best arrangement for the representation of primary societies in their ideological and parliamentary bodies what is of primary importance is the expression of the will of the cooperators themselves, the free and responsible human beings who have voluntarily joined together. Their representation in proportion to their number is the only equitable arrangement if the basic idea of cooperation as "the voluntary association of human beings on a basis of equality" is to be preserved at the parliamentary level of the movement.

The only exception that can be taken to the above argument is that there may be members at the primary level who are not really involved in their societies. Should they also be taken into account in assessing the proportional representation that is due to their societies at the higher level? This question can be replied with a forthright "no". But the remedy here lies with the primary society itself. As pointed out earlier, no person should be kept in membership who is not in need of the services of the society. Generally, it is not in the interests of the society to keep such person in membership. There may be an exception in the case of one who having joined the society when he was in need of its services has so improved his economic position through his participation in the society that he is not in need of the society's services now (as often happens in cooperative credit societies) but is so ideologically involved that he may be a great asset to the society.

Any other method of representation at the higher levels would have the same flow, if the primary societies do not weed out the members who are not really involved for the latter would still have a say in this representation.

The different degrees of interest displayed by the affiliated societies in their common organisation may not be assessable by their volume of purchases from it or of produce marketed through it. These volumes may represent the transactions of a few rich consumers or large producers. The grant of recognition in proportion to purchases or sales from or through the secondary level organisations would indirectly give a better position to societies of richer communities whose purchases and sales could be higher, in spite of the number of people involved in them being less than that in the societies of poorer communities. However, these methods do not appear so objectionable in the case of business federations.

The fact remains that proportional representation at the secondary level, be it on the basis of the membership of primary societies or of the purchases or sales made by them, is far more equitable than each member-society of a federation enjoying equal voting power, irrespective of its own membership or its involvement in the federation.

Member Involvement

“The viability of contemporary cooperative democracy depends much more upon the will to participate

than on the machinery for doing so." Unless members are involved, that is, unless they really care about their society and the way it is run, they will not have the will to participate in the running of the society, exercising their democratic rights in the best interests of their society. Therefore it is very necessary for societies to educate the members continuously, in order to make them involved in their societies. This alone will not do. The problem of widespread member apathy in the developing countries of Asia is mainly due to the identification of cooperatives in the public mind as concerns of the State. The members of most cooperatives in the developing countries "are like the passengers of a train using it only when it becomes necessary to do so for their own individual purposes; the running of the train is not their business. This is what must inevitably happen, when planning and organising come from the top. No movement can grow from the top downwards, least so the cooperative movement, for voluntary membership and democratic control are of the essence of the cooperative system". (Foreword to the Indian Edition of the ICA Principles Commission Report).

"The problem of widespread member apathy is in part a consequence of the structural changes in cooperatives which have resulted in larger administrative units and removed the point of decision-making to centres remote from members both geographically and in terms of comprehension. Even more, however, it is part and parcel of the modern milieu

with its bewildering variety of competing claims on the attention and energy of individuals. Hence the only hope of really involving members is through an appeal to their most vital interests". (ICA Secretariat Report to the Hamburg Congress). "The fundamental point is that it must be made possible for individual members to exert influence upon the activities of their society ...They will never be involved unless they are given a real stake in the enterprise. It follows that the major stress of a programme for democratic participation in cooperatives must be upon accountability to members". In the words of the ICA Principles Commission: "the cooperative substructure must not be demoted to a purely subordinate level, but must remain the fertile soil from which initiative and renewal will spring."

This is not to deny the structural impulse towards increased efficiency. "But this process must be safeguarded by redoubled efforts to preserve and strengthen ultimate accountability to members". Members must be associated with decisions to centralise and with "the continuing process of planning from the bottom up". "Cooperative democracy depends upon communication between members and management. Management and officials at every level must keep closely in touch with the views of individual members and machinery must be available for the forwarding of recommendations from the "grass roots" upward. This is the only guarantee that "efficiency" will be correctly interpreted in terms of members interests". (ICA

Secretariat). As said by Kerinec and Thedin "Democracy only works well when its objectives take account of man's needs and problems".

The distribution of tasks should place the initiative for cooperative policy at the level of the members in the case of primary societies and at the level of societies in the case of higher level organisations, and should also allow for the definition of a common policy which must be respected by all. "It is this reconciliation of democracy and efficiency within the framework of a federal type of structure which illustrates *the originality of our movement*".

"Each echelon of the democratically-chosen cooperative structure will have a precise task to accomplish. This is the first condition for the good functioning of democracy". The elections at different levels must be democratic and more than all there must be "a fruitful and permanent dialogue between those who hold power and those who have delegated it".

Democracy must be made to impregnate the machinery of a cooperative society. If democracy is to be put into practice certain conditions must be fulfilled *viz* :

- (a) continuous education of the members;
- (b) the members must be sufficiently interested in their organisation;
- (c) members of committees, councils and commissions within the movement must have knowledge of cooperative work and the economic situation, the elected leaders must possess sufficient knowledge of the technical

aspects of the business of the society to direct its general policy and to assess the work of specialised staff;

- (d) cooperative education and vocational training of employees.

As said by Mr. Eldin of the Swedish Cooperative College, "if we had to start our movement again at zero and had the choice between two alternatives: start with no capital but with enlightened members and staff, or start with a great deal of capital and an ill-informed membership, we should be inclined to choose the former". It is worthwhile our reflecting on the situation in our countries where a great deal of capital is found by or through the authorities and huge concerns are started in the name of Cooperation for a membership which is ill-informed and with a staff that has very little understanding of the cooperative method not to speak of the deeply democratic spirit of Cooperation.

The education of the members, the training of administrators, the members' assemblies, elections of officers, discussions, meetings and clubs, cooperative press and advertising, public discussions and pressure groups, surveys, and opportunities for the members to express their opinions and receive explanations as a continuous process—all these are relevant and important to cooperatives if their operations are to be always democratic. The movement has shown that thanks to its democratic institutions and organs it can further the best interest of man.

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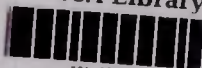
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