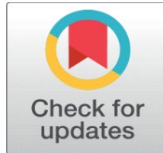
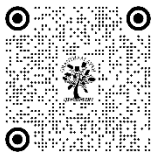


EXPLORING THE CHENNAMANGALAM SAREES OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT

India's economy is heavily reliant on the fashion industry, which boasts a rich array of traditional textiles. Among these, the Chennamangalam sarees stand out as a vivid representation of the nation's heritage. Hand-loomed in the village of Chennamangalam in Kerala, these sarees feature intricate designs and vibrant hues, showcasing the creative and technological prowess passed down through generations. Crafted by skilled artisans using locally sourced fabrics, these sarees are renowned for their stunning designs and sustainable materials, preserving traditional craftsmanship and environmentally responsible methods. They appeal to style enthusiasts seeking a blend of modernism and heritage, making them highly sought-after both domestically and internationally. By combining sustainability with style and heritage with innovation, Chennamangalam sarees are poised to make a significant impact on the global market for Indian textiles. This paper thoroughly examines Chennamangalam sarees, focusing on their rich history, intricate weaving techniques, and cultural significance. It also explores their entry into the global market, the support systems that sustain the craft, and the current dynamics of supply and demand. Providing valuable insights for participants in the textile industry, this study offers a comprehensive review of the opportunities and challenges facing Chennamangalam sarees in the future.

Keywords: Chennamangalam Sarees, Traditional Textiles, Kerala Handloom, Heritage Crafts, Artisanal Weaving

1. INTRODUCTION

Nestled in the heart of Kerala's handloom heritage, Chennamangalam personifies the region's rich history of expert craftsmanship. Located in the Ernakulam region, this village is a proud recipient of a geographical indication (GI) label, designating it as one of Kerala's leading producers of premium fabric. From the classic "set-mundu" and kasavu sarees for weddings to everyday basics like the traditional bath towel, "thorthu," Chennamangalam weavers specialize in creating authentic Kerala clothing.

Traditionally distinguished by their Puliylakkara borders, Chennamangalam sarees have evolved to incorporate modern motifs with ease, keeping up with

current fashion trends. Since the 17th century, the town has flourished as a hub for craftsmanship, especially for the Devang Chettiar people, acting as the foundation for handloom arts. These textiles are made by handloom weavers who need a great deal of talent and patience. It starts with the exact spinning of thread from raw cotton or silk fibers. The preservation of Chennamangalam's rich handloom legacy is ensured by the combination of contemporary weaving machinery and traditional weaving methods.

Kerala's handloom industry plays a significant role in the state's economy by creating a large number of jobs and encouraging sustainable growth. Notwithstanding its promise, the industry has several difficulties, especially in Kerala, where a move to cooperative models is required due to a decline in the number of looms and weavers. Cooperative societies preserve member welfare by promoting financial operations like production and distribution and placing a higher priority on mutual benefit than profit. Kerala's rich cultural tapestry is reflected in its handloom products, which are famed for their elaborate designs and vivid colors. Each weaving center in the state has its own distinct identity. Kerala's centuries-old handloom industry produces a wide range of goods, from Chennamangalam dhoties to Kasavu sarees, all of which are testaments to the talent and hard work of previous generations of workers [Aswani & Bhat \(2022\)](#).

2. HISTORY OF CHENNAMANGALAM SAREES

The state of Kerala is known for its five primary handwoven fabric-producing regions which are Balaramapuram, Chennamangalam, Kuthampully, Kannur, and Kasaragod. The beautiful village of Chennamangalam also known as Chennamangalam is 30 kilometers away from Ernakulam district and is particularly well-known for its weaving. These lovely fabrics have been created for a very long period by talented artisans in Chennamangalam. Chennamangalam, known as "The Handloom Village," is home to some of Kerala's best handwoven textiles. The production of handwoven textiles has a long tradition in the Chennamangalam region. The Paliyam family, prominent ministers to the Kings of Cochin, provided support to the weavers from the Devanga Chettiar clan. Situated throughout the Madras Presidency, the Devanga community consists of weavers who speak Canaree or Telugu. Their specialty was creating silk-bordered sarees for women made entirely of cotton. They go by several names, such as "Dendra," "Dera," "Sedan," and "Seniyan," which all indicate "great men." They are referred to as Settukkaran, or economic folks, in Coimbatore [Gadre \(2022\)](#).

The Paliyath Achan Family, prime ministers to the Kochi kings from 1663 until 1809, took great interest in the handwoven fabric from Chennamangalam. They utilized cloth from Tamil Nadu at first, but they were exposed to a very good fabric by a trader of the Chaliyan heritage, which they appreciated. He was hired by them to make more of it in Chennamangalam. With time, everyone in the village was able to purchase this beautiful cloth. However, with declining backing, the weaving business started to deteriorate by the early 20th century. The Kerala Co-operative Society Act passed in 1969, and the founding of the Chennamangalam Handloom Co-operative Society in 1954 both brought the sector back to life, fostering growth and generating a large number of jobs for the local community [Weaving Chennamangalam: Craft Documentation & Research Kerala Handloom \(2022\)](#).

3. PRODUCTION PROCESS

3.1. WEAVING

Chennamangalam's traditional weaving methods are characterized by labor-intensive, painstaking procedures that use hand-spun yarns. These yarns go through a rigorous pre-weaving process; they are notorious for their high cost and the difficulty they present in mass production.

- 1) **Yarn Collection:** The National Handloom Development Cooperation provides cotton yarn to the Chennamangalam handloom cooperative at a discounted price.
- 2) **Soaking the Yarn:** The weaver receives the yarn and soaks it in water for seven days. The yarn is removed, stomped on with feet, cleaned, and then soaked once more every day. The yarn is cleaned of contaminants by this everyday procedure.
- 3) **Yarn Drying:** Following the seven-day soaking period the yarn is removed and dyed if required.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Yarn Dyeing

- 4) **Spinning:** To create the thread, the dried yarn is spun on a hand-spun charkha.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Hand Spinning of Yarn

- 5) **Warp and Weft Preparation:** The thread is tied in a field and let dry on the streets as part of the warp and weft process.
- 6) **Starching:** A natural starch combination is applied to the fabric to make it stiff, wrinkle-free, and easy to color. This starch gives the cloth a subtle scent of coconut oil because it is made of rice flour, coconut oil, and water. The starch gradually disappears with each wash, softening the fabric over time.
- 7) **Drying with Starch:** The thread is sun-dried once more following starching. The drying is conducted between 6 and 8 a.m., to avoid the sun getting too strong.
- 8) **Aligning and Separating the Yarn:** To guarantee seamless weaving, the yarn is aligned and separated before the warp is loaded onto the loom.
- 9) **Loading onto the Loom:** Carefully winding the starched and aligned yarn around a wooden beam, the loom is brought to life.
- 10) **Weaving:** The handloom is loaded with the linked threads to start the weaving operation [Gadre \(2022\)](#), [Dey \(2021\)](#).

Figure 3



Figure 3 Weaving

Fine-count thread is a distinguishing feature of Chennamangalam sarees and textiles, signifying their superior quality. Usually, yarn counts of 120, 100, and 80 are used; however, in this case, a finer count of 2/120 is used. Making a saree with this yarn takes about two weeks total, but it might take longer depending on how intricate the design is.

3.2. DESIGNS AND MOTIFS

Earlier in the Paliam era, Chennamangalam sarees were woven with no patterns at all, only plain zari or colorful borders were created. Simple patterns like "buttas" and "butti" started to be embroidered on saris over time. Over time, more complex patterns and designs emerged, with a predilection for geometric patterns—especially lines.

In modern times, the Paliyam Palace's architectural details—recognized for their magnificent Kerala-style architecture—often inspire the themes found on Chennamangalam saris. The stylized motifs on the saris are both modern and traditional. The narrow borders of men's clothing, such as dhotis, are often woven parallel to the wider kasavu borders using the puliyilakara pattern, which resembles tamarind leaves. Furthermore, a cross-border made of extra weft, referred to as "chuttikara" or "kattikara," is perpendicular to the kasavu border and spans the breadth of the cloth. Although Chennamangalam weaving is frequently compared to Balaramapuram weaving, there are some significant distinctions between the two. Products made in Chennamangalam, such as the set mundu, typically include colorful borders with coordinating stripes and infrequently incorporate kasavu designs as ornamentation. On the other hand, the weaving of Balaramapuram is distinguished by the prominent usage of kasavu motifs, which are heavily integrated into their designs [Weaving Chennamangalam: Craft Documentation & Research Kerala Handloom \(2022\)](#), [Alexander \(2020\)](#).

The "Thazhampoo," a delicate floral pattern that mimics the blooms of the Thazhampoo (Hibiscus) flower, is one of the most recognizable motifs in Chennamangalam sarees. This pattern is frequently woven onto the pallu, or loose end of the saree, to produce an exquisite visual impact. Another well-liked design feature is the "Muthuchippu," or "pearl drops." This elaborate pattern gives the saree a sophisticated and elegant look with its tiny, pearl-like patterns grouped in a cascade or scattered shape. Chennamangalam sarees also frequently incorporate the "Chakra" or wheel motif, which symbolizes the state's long-standing association with the wheel as a sign of development and wealth. This pattern is frequently woven throughout the saree's body to give it a dynamic and flowing feel.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Designs & Motifs

Natural dyes were employed in traditional Chendamangalam sarees to create primary colours like blue, yellow, and red, particularly on the borders and body. The traditional set mundu garment had pure gold borders. Modern renditions, on the other hand, use a wider range of colours, including artificial dyes like Vat dyes, which provide vivid hues like maroon, grey, pink, and violet. These sarees retain the puliyilakara border, which is a thin black line along the selvedge, and frequently contain contrasting colour combinations, such as checks of green and violet. The

change in colour has made Chendamanangalam sarees more contemporary and aesthetically pleasing while maintaining its traditional qualities.

4. SWOT ANALYSIS

4.1. STRENGTHS

- 1) **Distinctive Design and Quality:** Chennamangalam sarees are highly sought after by consumers because of their exquisite designs, sophisticated grey colors, and superb craftsmanship.
- 2) **Geographical Indication (GI) Tag:** The GI tag was given in 2011 by the government of India on these sarees ensuring their genuineness and protecting the age-old techniques that went into making them [Aswani & Bhat \(2022a\)](#)
- 3) **Rich Cultural Legacy:** Chennamangalam sarees, which have their roots in Kerala's cultural legacy, are an encapsulation of the state's lengthy history and handloom weaving tradition.
- 4) **Skilled Artists:** These sarees are expertly crafted by artists who have refined their methods over many generations, resulting in a constant display of fine quality and detail.

4.2. WEAKNESSES

- 1) **Limited Production Capacity:** The time-consuming and labor-intensive traditional handloom method used to create Chennamangalam sarees limits the total production capacity.
- 2) **Dependency on Local Market:** These sarees are mostly sold in Kerala, where they are subject to changes in the local market and competition from other regional goods.
- 3) **Limited Brand Awareness:** Chennamangalam sarees might not be as well-known outside of Kerala, even though they are well-known within it.
- 4) **Susceptibility to Market Trends:** Changes in consumer tastes and fashion trends may affect the demand and sales of these sarees, given their popularity.

4.3. OPPORTUNITIES

- 1) **Growing Demand for Handcrafted Goods:** Customers looking for unique, high-end, and environmentally friendly products are driving a growing interest in genuine handcrafted goods.
- 2) **Penetration into Domestic and Worldwide Markets:** Chennamangalam sarees can be introduced to both domestic and worldwide markets, increasing their market presence and sales potential, and utilizing efficient marketing and branding techniques.
- 3) **Strategic Alliances and Collaborations:** Working with shops, fashion designers, or textile companies can help these sarees become more visible and appealing to a wider range of consumers.
- 4) **Digital Marketing and Online Retail:** Using digital platforms and e-commerce channels can increase sales, build brand awareness, and enable a wider client base.

4.4. THREATS

- 1) **Competition from Mass-Produced Textiles:** Chennamangalam sarees are facing fierce competition from mass-produced textiles, which presents a challenge to their market domination because of their cheaper prices and wider availability.
- 2) **Variable Raw Material Costs:** The production costs and profitability of Chennamangalam sarees can be greatly impacted by the variable costs of raw materials like cotton or silk.
- 3) **Impact of Natural Disasters and Climate Change:** Natural disasters and climate change provide risks since they might impair the supply chain for raw materials, cause production pauses, and perhaps lower the quality of sarees.
- 4) **Inadequate Government Support:** Government policies that do not promote the development of Chennamangalam sarees may hinder the growth and advancement of the handloom industry [Aswani & Bhat \(2022a\)](#).

The swot analysis leads to the conclusion that Leveraging strengths entails showcasing the history of the sarees through partnerships with museums, marketing initiatives, and alliances with fashion influencers and designers to promote the GI tag and rich cultural legacy. Working with modern designers and making design research investments can help to create innovative designs while maintaining conventional methods. Weaver training programs, better looms and tools, and increased production capacity through technological advancements are some ways to address deficiencies. It's imperative to grow the business outside of Kerala by creating a robust internet presence, e-commerce skills, and involvement in prominent fashion events.

Making the most of opportunities entails attending international trade shows, collaborating with sustainable fashion businesses to produce exclusive collections, and researching export markets. Offering customized choices, expanding the product line to include different clothing and home textiles, diversifying the product line, and putting cost-control measures in place like bulk purchasing raw materials and streamlining production processes are all crucial to reducing risks. Additionally, the interests of traditional weavers can be safeguarded by pushing for legislative support and collaborating with regional and industry associations to get funding, tax breaks, and the construction of infrastructure. Chendamangalam sarees have the potential to prosper in the competitive textile industry by utilizing their strengths, resolving their weaknesses, seizing chances, and eliminating risks. A holistic strategy emphasising design innovation, market growth, sustainability, and policy advocacy will support the livelihood of local weavers and enable this GI-tagged handloom craft to flourish.

5. THE CHENDAMANGALAM HANDLOOM WEAVERS COOPERATIVE SOCIETY

In the 20th century, the Chendamangalam handloom industry faced serious challenges despite its rich history and continued popularity. The demand for traditional handloom items declined as machine-made fabrics gained popularity, placing a great deal of pressure on Chendamangalam's small-scale weaving

businesses. Known for their exquisite designs and superior textiles, these weavers found it difficult to compete with mechanised textile manufacturing's cheaper costs and capacity for mass production. The Chendamangalam Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society was founded in 1954 as a reaction to this situation. This collective was established in accordance with the Kerala Cooperative Societies Act of 1969 and was instrumental in bringing the handloom industry back to life in the area. The cooperative gave weavers vital support to maintain their livelihoods and carry on their trade, such as financial aid, marketing resources, and access to raw materials.

Dedicated to preserving the history of their trade, more than 140 weavers work together at the thriving Chendamangalam Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society today. In addition to offering job opportunities, society also acts as a hub for cooperation and innovation. It encourages weavers to share ideas and methods, which leads to the development of fresh designs and higher-quality finished goods. The cooperative also uses fairs, exhibitions, and internet platforms to market Chendamangalam handlooms, expanding their reach and improving their marketability. The traditional craft of handloom weaving has flourished thanks to the cooperative's efforts, protecting an important part of Kerala's cultural legacy and guaranteeing a sustainable future for upcoming generations of weavers [Graamyam Handcrafted Stories. \(2021\)](#), [Dastakar LLP. \(2019\)](#).

6. IMPACT OF 2018 FLOOD AND ITS INITIATIVES FOR REVIVAL AND PRESERVATION

The Chendamangalam handloom sector was badly hit in 2018 by the disastrous floods that occurred in Kerala. Looms, threads, and completed textiles were all damaged by floodwaters, costing the weavers around Rs 15 crore in damages. Across seven cooperative organisations in the area, 273 looms sustained damage, resulting in the unemployment of over 350 weavers and related labourers. The Chendamangalam weavers, who already suffered from meagre daily pay of about Rs 150, were thrown into even greater financial hardship as a result of this calamity. Although it appeared impossible to revive the industry, the weavers' tenacity and resolve, along with the assistance of other groups and projects, cleared the path for an incredible recovery.

Following the floods, a number of programmes were started to help the Chendamangalam weavers and bring the handloom sector back to life. One such project was "Care 4 Chendamangalam," a group effort with the goal of helping the impacted weavers both immediately and over time. This project provided necessary supplies, repaired damaged looms, and provided funding so that the artisans could resume their work.

Apart from these community-based initiatives, the government intervened to provide assistance to the Chendamangalam handloom sector. To aid in the reconstruction of the damaged infrastructure and provide the weavers with the means to continue their art, a number of financial assistance programmes and plans were developed. The government, non-governmental organisations, and the local communities have worked together to revive Chendamangalam's handloom sector. The Chendamangalam handloom industry has recovered and is thriving as a result of everyone's combined efforts, protecting an important part of Kerala's cultural legacy and giving the weavers a stable source of income. Despite the difficulties encountered, this ancient art form has survived and thrived thanks to the tenacity

and camaraderie exhibited by the weavers and those who support them [Rajeev \(2021\)](#).

NABARD and the Chendamangalam weavers collaborated throughout the epidemic to address the problem of unpaid salaries as a result of low sales, even during holidays. They collaborated to develop Coop Loom, an online store where customers can buy handloom goods straight from the website.

NABARD and Kerala Bank sponsored an exhibition during the shutdown in March 2021, which resulted in the sale of ₹15 lakhs worth of handloom stock in three days. Building on this success, NABARD introduced the "cooploom" e-commerce platform for handloom cooperatives to let them sell directly to customers in India and abroad at the second edition of Chela 2022, which took place on April 7th. This event again saw tremendous success. The Chendamangalam handloom cluster has benefited greatly from NABARD's financial support, infrastructural development, capacity building, marketing, promotion, and policy lobbying. In terms of funding, they gave ₹3.30 lakhs for development projects and supported banks in giving loans to weavers.

They've also set up training programs to improve the abilities of weavers, built display halls, and made it easier for them to participate in fairs and shows to market their goods. Additionally, in order to give weavers access to better markets, NABARD funded the establishment of Handloom Owners Farmer Producer Organizations (OFPOs). To help the handloom industry, they collaborate with industry associations and the state government as part of their policy advocacy activities. The Chendamangalam handloom cluster, a GI-tagged traditional skill of Kerala, has been preserved and promoted thanks in large part to NABARD's all-encompassing approach, which has ensured its continuous expansion and success [Gadre, K. \(2022\), Weaving Chennamangalam: Craft Documentation & Research Kerala Handloom \(2022\)](#).

7. ORIGIN OF CHEKUTTY DOLLS

The "Chekutty dolls" project was another creative endeavour that attracted a lot of interest. These handmade dolls were created using soiled and damaged fabrics that were saved from the floods, and they were spearheaded by social entrepreneurs Lakshmi Menon and Gopinath Parayil. The Chekutty dolls became a symbol of optimism and resiliency, demonstrating the community's capacity to turn hardship into opportunity, in addition to raising money for the weavers.

- 1) **The origin of Chekutty Dolls:** These are handcrafted dolls produced from filthy and torn handloom fabrics that were saved from Chendamangalam's floods. Those useless textiles were turned into adorable dolls.
- 2) **Designed by Social Entrepreneurs:** Lakshmi Menon and Gopinath Parayil, two social entrepreneurs, came up with the idea for the dolls with the intention of helping the local weavers who had been affected by the floods. The project aimed to turn damaged textiles into representations of resiliency and hope.
- 3) **Symbolic Name:** "Chekutty" represents the weavers' perseverance in conquering hardship and is derived from the Malayalam words "cheru" (dirt) and "kutty" (kid). Every doll represents the capacity to overcome obstacles and fashion beauty out of devastation.
- 4) **Unique Creations:** Volunteers create each Chekutty doll, adding their own unique touches through imaginative decorating. Because of the crowdsourcing method, every doll is unique and has a unique touch.

- 5) **Support for Weavers:** The Chendamangalam Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society receives a direct profit from the sale of these dolls, which is used to provide vital funding to assist weavers in rebuilding their standard of living. Their ability to pursue their trade has been financially sustained by the project.
- 6) **International Symbol of Hope:** The Chekutty dolls have drawn a lot of attention and support and have come to represent resilience and hope on a worldwide scale. This demonstrates the effectiveness of neighborhood-based initiatives during emergencies.
- 7) **Corporate Support:** Organisations such as CGH Earth have adopted Chekutty dolls, showcasing them as décor and honouring Kerala's handloom legacy. The impact of the campaign has been further enhanced by this corporate backing.
- 8) The Chekutty dolls are a charming and creative solution to the difficulties Chendamangalam handloom workers encounter. They draw attention to the ability of neighborhood-based projects to maintain and revitalise traditional crafts, turning hardships into chances for development and rebirth. The rich cultural legacy of Chendamangalam's handloom industry has been preserved thanks to the efforts of volunteers, social entrepreneurs, and supporting organisations. This has been made possible by the Chekutty dolls [Abraham \(2018\)](#), [DC Correspondent. \(2018\)](#).

Figure 5



Figure 5 Chekutty Dolls [Menon \(2024\)](#)

8. CHALLENGES FACED CHENNAMANGALAM WEAVING

The handloom weaving community of Chennamangalam, Kerala, India, has faced significant challenges recently, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating 2018 floods. The community has been profoundly affected by these events, which have uprooted their homes, livelihoods, and the spirit of their ancient trade. At present, the seven cooperative organizations that make up the Chennamangalam handloom cluster are spread out across the town. The passage of the Kerala Co-operative Societies Act in 1969 marked a turning point in the history of the Chennamangalam handloom cluster by streamlining its structure. Before the establishment of this legal structure, weavers faced chaos and erratic market conditions. The Kerala Co-operative Societies Act's passage was essential in preserving the quality of textiles during the weaving process. However, in 2018, the

terrible floods in Kerala caused a major blow for the weaving cluster. The disaster caused mayhem, destroying centuries-old wooden looms, factories, and the homes and livelihoods of weavers, along with fabric valued at lakhs of rupees. They suffered significant financial losses as a result of this calamity, which ended their means of subsistence. Nevertheless, the weaving community was able to reinstall looms and obtain financial support with the help of numerous NGOs and volunteers.

Operations were further hindered in 2020 by the lockdown brought on by COVID-19. For this weaving community, the Onam and Vishu festivals are quite important; sales of handloom stock usually account for 60% and 40% of total sales, respectively. The 2020 lockdown resulted in 0% sales of holiday apparel, which made obtaining raw materials more difficult. However, an exhibition supported by Kerala Bank and NABARD during the lockdown in March 2021 proved successful, selling 15 lakhs worth of handloom stock in just three days. Building on this success, the exhibition's second edition, Chela 2022, which opened on April 7th, saw a notable increase in sales. By utilising the cooploom e-commerce platform, which is funded by NABARD, handloom cooperatives can establish direct connections with consumers both domestically and globally, providing a ray of hope in the face of hardship [Jeelani \(2019\)](#), [Martin \(2020\)](#).

9. CONCLUSION

In India's dynamic textile industry, the Chennamangalam sarees perfectly capture the delicate balance between tradition and innovation. Chennamangalam sarees, steeped in centuries-old customs and prized for their distinctive patterns, epitomise Keralan artisanal craftsmanship. The Chennamangalam weaving community has shown incredible perseverance in the face of huge obstacles like market competition and natural disasters. The handloom sector has been greatly revitalised, maintaining the authenticity and quality of these fine textiles, thanks in large part to the cooperative model and the backing of government and non-governmental organisations. The demanding production method and rich history of Chennamangalam sarees demonstrate the commitment and talent of the artists, who still maintain their trade with astounding accuracy. These sarees meet modern needs for eco-friendly and sustainable products while also paying homage to Kerala's rich cultural heritage. They are a valued asset in both domestic and foreign markets because of their unique patterns and the Geographical Indication (GI) badge, which increase their appeal.

In the future, digital channels, international partnerships, and intelligent marketing will present chances for Chennamangalam sarees. Through the use of these channels, the sarees can be more widely known and appeal to a variety of customer types. Nonetheless, it is imperative to tackle the weaknesses associated with variable raw material expenses and market forces. This industry can be further stabilised and expanded by strengthening government assistance and encouraging innovation in production techniques. All things taken into account, Chennamangalam sarees have a bright future as a representation of India's extensive textile legacy. Their transition from conventional handlooms to modern fashion demonstrates the lasting importance of cultural craftsmanship in an international marketplace. Chennamangalam sarees have the potential to significantly contribute to the global promotion of artisanal and sustainable fashion as they continue to develop.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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