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Misappropriation of Indian Knowledge Resources by the West: A Study of Select Works by Rajiv Malhotra

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Abstract

For far too long now, the western appropriation and commercialization of Indian knowledge resources has been going on without any meaningful resistance, primarily due to the colonial mindset prevalent in the Indian academy. This appropriation has not only been happening without acknowledgement but also been subjected to clever manipulation and substitution to serve their interests. Where they failed to do so, they simply discredited our ancient knowledge. The well-researched books by Rajiv Malhotra and his co-authors challenge several western concepts and commentaries, postulates and theories about India to bring out their incongruities and misinterpretations. In this, Malhotra, as the lead author, also highlights the

civilizational bias of the West that continues to exist since the period of colonization. Besides, he rips apart the western project to hegemonize rest of the world through its ever-changing theories and concepts under the façade of universalism. The role of Indian scholars and philanthropists, foreign universities and agencies has been scrutinized. My article takes a critical look on different works by the acclaimed author and his co-authors, in a bid to underline their significance in highlighting the appropriation and assimilation of Indian knowledge resources by the western academy, in addition to furthering the cause of decolonization of Indian intelligentsia.

Keywords: Western Hegemony, Indian Culture, Deep State, Indology, Decolonization

Introduction

With the rise of India on the world stage, great interest among scholars is evinced in Indian history and culture. Since colonial times, there have been genuine as also malicious attempts at understanding and accepting the Indian knowledge resources. That calls for caution since most Indian intellectuals tend to accept blindly the translations and commentaries of our knowledge texts presented to us by the western scholars which, as the renowned Indologist Rajiv Malhotra points out, is the result of our colonial mindset that is being reinforced by the academia-politics combine in the West. His books are the result of intensive research which reveal how the situation changed during colonized period; the pilferage and fake re-branding of ancient Indian knowledge; and its export back to India with the intention not only to perpetuate the inferiority complex among Indians, but also to balkanize India on the basis of fake narratives, while arrogating to themselves the status of sole reservoir of all knowledge in the world.

Rajiv Malhotra, born in Delhi, studied at St. Stephens College, and later went to study computer science at Syracuse University, USA. After finishing studies, he became an entrepreneur, setting up business which grew to cover different continents. At the age of 44, he quit his sprawling business to devote full time to the cause of fighting prejudices in the American academy against Indian culture and history and to project rightly the contribution of India to world civilization. He is a perceptive thinker, writer, and public intellectual who speaks on cross-cultural encounters and world religions. He is also at home in science, technology and corporate management. He has been lecturing world-wide and a large number of videos of his public lectures are available on the internet which have generated a lot of interest as also controversy. Infinity Foundation founded by Malhotra has given more than 400 grants for various conferences, scholars, chairs, etc. in different universities. He

is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the India Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts.

This paper banks on some key texts by Rajiv Malhotra (abbreviations used in the paper are also mentioned alongside), viz.,

1. *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines* (co-authored with Aravindan Neelakandan, 2011) = BI,
2. *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (2011) = BD,
3. *The Battle for Sanskrit* (2016) = BFS,
4. *Sanskrit Non-Translatables* (co-written with Satyanarayan Dass Babaji, 2020) = SNT,
5. *Snakes in the Ganga: Breaking India 2.0* (2022) = SG

Malhotra's writings challenge the western hegemony that started with certain European countries colonizing a large part of the world 1500 AD onward, which still continues through subtle mechanisms. The serious research done by Malhotra and his associates is on many issues like history, politics, education, philosophy, religion and artificial intelligence. His objective is to awaken Indian mind to the serious threat to Indian civilization from the western ideologues. While the stolen artefacts can be recovered and brought back from abroad, it is an arduous task to locate the Indian knowledge pilfered from our classical texts. In his books, Malhotra also takes up the naïve intellectuals, philanthropists and not-so-naïve collaborators who help the western (mainly American) academy and activists.

Malhotra's approach in these books is a very balanced and fair one – in line with the ancient *shastrartha* tradition – where each argument presented by one participant was logically answered by the other. Since that kind of in-person debate is hardly the norm these days, he goes about meticulously searching and documenting explicitly the *purva paksha*, i.e., what the other party says, to which he replies point-by-point. Finally, since it is well-nigh impossible to present a critique of all the books running into thousands of pages, this paper will take up some key issues briefly.

Politics Behind Aryan Invasion Theory

When it comes to probing the culture of a society, its history is the key, because it lends civilizational value to it. Malhotra's first important book co-written with Anandan Neelakandan titled *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines*, (2011) delves into the history of the period when the country was colonized and find an interesting aspect relating to how the Europeans projected their superiority banking upon the ownership of Sanskrit language. It is a fact that during the period of Romanticism in Europe in the first half of the 19th century, Sanskrit departments were established in many universities there. Now, the origin of European languages, which was later theorized as the Indo-European group of languages, was sought to be linked to India because of the richness of classical Sanskrit literature and knowledge. Germany, according to Malhotra, suffered from an inferiority complex as it did not have a foreign empire or a noble lineage like other European powers. It, therefore, was in the forefront of claiming Sanskrit as the language of its forefathers whom they erroneously called 'Aryans; based on the Sanskrit word

'Arya' found in ample measure in Sanskrit literature but which actually means a noble person. This is how the term 'Aryan' came to be applied by Europeans to race.

German scholars developed the Aryan Invasion Theory according to which the Aryans travelled from Germany to India and invaded the natives there, settled down there and produced wonderful literature. When it was pointed out that there did not exist any evidence to support the invasion, the theory was revised as Aryan Migration Theory, according to which the Aryans peacefully displaced the original Dravid inhabitants to south India. But then how could Germans claim to be Aryans themselves if they had migrated to India? So, the revised version of the invasion theory spoke of the Aryans coming from India and making Germany their home. (BI 15-36). This was a flip-flop that must have created a lot of amusement. A number of German scholars like Herder, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Max Mueller, et al. worked in this direction and influenced other European scholars too. Even though the potential of the Sanskrit language to fix Western identity was found to be useful and the Sanskrit literature was appreciated, yet the West could not digest the spiritual content of the Sanskrit literature as it went against the tenets of Christianity. So, we find later Hegel's narrative of history as leading to an ultimate blossoming of the universal World Spirit through Western rather than Asian nations which was developed and "exported" to India. Karl Marx was another German influenced by Hegel. Both these philosophers denied India any history, and this helped the colonizers legitimize their exploitation in the garb of civilizing Indians, under the banner of White Man's Burden or the so-called Civilizing Mission.

Hitler's pure Aryan theory brought about war in Europe, and so, after WWII, there were efforts to exorcise the Aryan race theory and race science, eugenics, etc. from European mind even as it has stuck to the Indian intellectuals' mind. (BI 13, 35). American Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock claimed Hitler had been influenced by Mimamsa to commit genocide. Interestingly, Pollock was awarded Padma Shri by the Govt. of India in 2010 (BI 35-36)!

Plundering Indian Knowledge Resources

After the western experiment with the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, it was as if a predator had savoured the blood of a prey; it set them on the road to appropriate Indian knowledge resources just as they looted money and material resources during colonial times.¹ Malhotra, therefore, rightly compares it with the Predator-Prey analogy, according to which the West discredits our indigenous knowledge systems through mapping of the disjointed parts of Indian culture on to the western taxonomy and rejecting as useless what cannot be mapped. It is like a predator animal which kills its prey and eats it up, leaving behind the skeleton. The process is 'epistemic cannibalization' (BI 309), which is one up on the concept of 'epistemic violence' popularized by another Indian theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Take for example, Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* which was the trigger behind Ferdinand de Saussure's formulation of structuralism. While this fact is too well known to need repetition here (Cardona), an instance of contemporary misappropriation of Sri Aurobindo's theory of

consciousness by one of his western disciples has been mentioned by Malhotra et al in their book titled *The Battle for Consciousness Theory: A Response to Ken Wilber's Appropriation of Sri Aurobindo's Work and Other Indian Thought* (2024). As the title indicates, it discusses American scholar Ken Wilber's espousal of the levels of consciousness which he terms as Wilber 1, Wilber 2, and so on in his so-called Integral Theory, hijacking the levels marked by Sri Aurobindo. It may be mentioned here that when Malhotra organized a conference on Integral Consciousness in America, Wilber claimed monopoly on the term which was effectively rebutted by Malhotra as actually being Sri Aurobindo's, thus returning the ball to the former's court. In the book too, while revealing the chinks in Wilber's theory, the writers underline the crude attempt of the western scholar to hold aloft western universalism at the expense of Vedic tradition. There are several such scholars who approached Indian gurus showing reverence, got the gift of knowledge from them, but then put their own trademark on it and exported it back to India. Malhotra appropriately denotes it by U-turn theory.

Appropriation Through Translation/ Interpretation

While Wilber renamed, sitting in his armchair, the psychic conditions initially discovered by Sri Aurobindo through yogic mode, another way to appropriate Indian knowledge systems has been through translation of Sanskrit words into English. Now, there are limitations to the act of translation and linguistic, cultural and political angles interfere in it.

...translation is always imperfect, more so, when it comes to expressing something from a hallowed text. The language, as we know, comes with its cultural baggage, and it is well-nigh impossible to understand completely through translation the exact meaning and significance of a term from another language, much less if the source language happens to be Sanskrit where spiritual sadhana is also conjoined to the expression. It is difficult to translate Sanskrit terms into English because in Sanskrit, the word, sound and meaning – all go together. (Batra 189).

In their joint work, *Sanskrit Non-Translatables*, Rajiv Malhotra and Satyanarayan Dasa Babaji have pointed out inadequate or erroneous translations of 54 Sanskrit terms like Dharma, Rashtra, Ahimsa, Itihasa, etc. which are generally translated into English as religion, nation, non-violence, and history respectively. But a lot of meaning remains unrevealed or is distorted when it is translated into English. The term 'Yoga', for example, is generally understood in the West as just physical exercises which is incomplete understanding of this discipline because it leaves out other seven constituents, viz., prāṇayāma, pratyāhāra, dhārnā, dhyāna and samādhi, according to Patanjali's *Yoga Darshan* (2:29).

Malhotra's search about the misuse of Sanskrit words opened another vista where the entire texts are being interpreted and explained from the western lens. The book *The Battle for Sanskrit* by Rajiv Malhotra et al takes the reader to the ongoing battle for appropriating our Sanskriti or culture. Malhotra is livid about the nefarious agenda of the western ideologues which is to somehow convince Indians that (i) the Vedas are myths, (ii) Native claims about

their divine status are nonsensical, (iii) The Sanskrit texts justify abusive social economic and political practices, (iv) 'they' – the American Orientalists know better than us, and that (v) the Indian government's efforts to revive Sanskrit is dangerous for the downtrodden people. (BFS 23-28). This clearly fits in with the age-old practice of the dictum 'divide and rule' of the western colonizers.

Malhotra is very honest about dealing with the views of foreigners in a fair and square manner. Take, for example, the skewed views of Sheldon Pollock about Indian classical works. He has been working as the editor of the Murty Classical Library, translating various Sanskrit texts and is easily accepted as a great scholar by many Indians. Surprisingly, he believes that Hindu traditions are tied to social abuse. In his book *The Battle for Sanskrit*, Malhotra mentions his meeting with Pollock, who tried to overawe him, mentioning his long years of Sanskrit study that Pollock believed, should show his love for Sanskrit, but Malhotra countered him with the argument that even Islamophobes study Islam meticulously to find out holes in it, and not to love it. (BFS 14).

Malhotra's criticism of Sheldon Pollock, which forms the stimulus for his voluminous book *The Battle for Sanskrit* is based on the fact that he imposes the western historical/literary/ mythological paradigms on Indian itihasa. Pollock criticizes Ramayana as a myth as against history. Secondly, he faults Rama, as the hero of the epic because of 'lack of agency' needed in a Greek hero (BFS 191). He is not able to understand that in the Indian context, even the "divine kingship is based on the dharmic order". (BFS 185). Rama had to abandon wife due to his commitment to raj-dharma, thus forsaking his personal love life. The concept of Ram Rajya calls for a welfare state wherein "administration is focused on the welfare of every part of the society equally, without exploiting any segment." Besides, Ram Rajya focusses on the justice accessibility and delivery, rights and responsibilities, and the accountability of law dispensers. (Ganatra 294-302). Portraying Ramayana as a piece of atrocity literature is the current political project of the west aimed at filling the Indian mind with aversion towards their own culture.

American Academy's Complicity

It is not the case of a lone Sheldon Pollock or Wendy Doniger, according to Malhotra, the anti-India mindset of the present-day western academia is seriously, though stealthily, working at projects which are more political than academic. The second edition of the 'Breaking India' series came out in 2022 and this 812-page tome was titled *Snakes in the Ganga* – an off-beat title but quite apt for the Indian milieu and its suggestive import. Whereas his first book studied the period of colonization, in the present book, he takes up the current machinations of the American academia by promoting the mapping the Indian situation on to the Critical Race Theory that was born in the context of American Black population. In this evil-intentioned strategy, the race is being equated with caste. The South Indians are compared to the American Blacks and the North Indians to the Whites there. No doubt, such postulates are lapped up by the neo-intelligentsia here in India². Further, by some cerebral sleight, the Muslims and the LGBTQ+ populations are also clubbed with the 'Blacks' of India. This is clearly

overstretched and reminds one of the remark that Dr Samuel Johnson made about the metaphors used by Metaphysical poets: "...yoked by violence together"!

In presenting India and its culture in poor light, the American educational institutions are found on the forefront. Malhotra has stayed long enough in America and is thoroughly aware of the machinations of these institutions. His attempts to get its researchers take up projects on Vivekananda's influence on America got lip service only, so did his plea to promote India-loving Transcendentalist Ralph Emerson's writings. In case of Thoreau, Harvard has simply denied India's influence – something clearly admitted by the writer himself, besides ignoring such request in the case of Nobel-awardee T.S. Eliot. (SG 274-78). Anyone conversant with the works of these authors would know their connection with the Indian culture.³

A recent clandestine project undertaken by Harvard University showed its interest in studying the tribal Munda languages spoken in Chhatisgarh and Odisha states of India. Investigation by the Infinity Foundation brought out a shocking revelation. It was not the love for an obscure language but a hypothesis being worked upon whereby they intended showing both the Aryans and the Dravidians as outsiders. While the Aryans were said to have displaced the Dravidians, the Dravidians will now be said to have displaced the Munda speakers who are sought to be projected as the original inhabitants of India. In this, the Maoist movement rife in that area is sought to be used as a tool. (SG 281-82). All this fits in well with Harvard's project to show the seeds of disunity in India and try to dismember it.

The Critical Race Theory has metamorphosed into Wokism in America which seeks to focus on equality of results rather than equal opportunities for endeavour. This skewed thinking has caught the fancy of the young students in America. How they reject meritocracy that the US prided upon as an integral feature of American Exceptionalism!

To berate India and other rising powers, the new genres like Atrocity Literature focussing on only the prevalent social problems of India are being created primarily at Harvard where under the guidance of American professors, "a large number of them [Indians] are involved in this enterprise, performing roles from top professors to junior scholars, all the way down to students" (SG xxv). This new type of scholarship is then being imported into India, infiltrating "Indian industry, government, media, philanthropy, and just about every segment of civil society" (SG xxvii). This blatant biased approach, notes Malhotra, "started to get cleaned up for public show at least to some extent from 2005 onward. That is when Harvard decided to solicit funds from Indian donors" (SG 281). Needless to say, many Indian billionaires readily came forward.

Foreign Funding

Moving away from philanthropy, Malhotra focusses on the big businessmen bitten by the bug of politics which is a new entry in world politics. We know about George Soros and his collaboration with Rockefeller Foundation and universities like Harvard, wanting to bring about a radical change in the world order. They have a ready army of foot

soldiers, i.e., a large number of university students brainwashed by the leftist intellectuals and professors who support this unholy alliance. This finding by Malhotra seems credible, what with the pro-Palestine flags flaunted at youth rallies for which tents had come up overnight in various American universities, after the start of the Arab-Israel War in 2023.

Malhotra identifies another billionaire Pierre Morad Omidyar, the founder of eBay, whose net worth is around 20 billion dollars and who is "far more tech savvy and strategic in his approach to social engineering" (SG 584). He has also jumped onto the bandwagon touted as a changemaker in society and politics through effective use of AI. Feted as the "champion of protecting democracies under attack" (SG 584), which is to beguile the gullible. He invests in selected organizations with appealing names. Indeed, the contemporary times seem to be the age of sophisticated civilizing missions! In India, their office is in Mumbai and bears the signage Omidyar Network India, which aims to "influence the Indian government's policies by funding various organizations, including its own start-ups, industry organizations and established institutions" (SG 593). As per information available now, this company has exited India in 2024 due to various reasons including the problems with the Indian law enforcement agencies. It can be argued that every industrialist lobbies with the government agencies to secure benefits, but then the groups like Omidyar mean to play politics through backdoor, and not openly espouse their cause in a democratic manner.

Malhotra notes that such billionaires "have the financial strength to bypass FCRA regulations and enter India as a for-profit business, to conduct their 'Breaking India' activities. India needs to take another look at foreign enterprises entering India on the pretext of doing business. This is going to be a challenge to separate the wheat from the chaff but that is the need of the hour" (SG 592), aver Malhotra and Viswanathan.

India Studies fellowships at Harvard are 'facilitated' by leading Chinese universities under the control of Chinese government. (SG 530). Chinese funding is propping up centres like Confucius Institutes or Centres for China Studies in many educational institutions. Woke supporters (read politicians) backed by Chinese funding are actively targeting IITs and IIMs in India (through Harvard-China collaboration route) because these prestigious institutions are an eyesore for them. This game is also being played in India through various institutions. Even the Saudis have joined the nexus of American universities and Indian billionaires. (SG 500-511).

Indian Response

Surprisingly, Indian billionaires are found supporting India-centred study centres in many American universities. Harvard is the foremost university which Malhotra does not mince words and names people like Naryan Murty, Ambani, Mahindra, et al who are contributing mammothly to these universities without considering their nefarious intentions. Narayan Murthy's funding of the Murty Classical Library under Sheldon Pollock is a case in point. So are the initiatives by Lakshmi Mittal and Piramal groups who fund the diversity, equity and inclusivity (DEI) projects

supposedly to bring about social justice in India for the Dalits and the women, but which actually aim at creating divisions in the Indian society. There are umpteen alliances of say, Harvard University with media groups in India.

The writer-duo come down heavily on elite Indian universities where liberal arts education has been introduced. These institutions “lean on western social sciences and humanities, ignoring India’s own rich intellectual traditions in the same fields” (SG 564). This is assigning the status of ‘Vishwaguru’ to Harvard with other Western universities” (SG 564), but the Western academicians’ “movements to champion dissent are a front to fuel sedition in India” (SG 559). Some Indian universities like Azim Premji have been named by the writers as the active collaborators of the Ivy League universities ministering anti-India propaganda material and courses. Malhotra devotes a full chapter to Ashoka University under the caption “Ashoka University: Harvard University’s Junior Partner”, (SG 517-560). where the ‘research’ coming from Harvard and Yale etc. universities is distributed as per their direction (SG 557).

It is also a pity that the Indian scholars fail to understand the huge efforts and resources being used to malign the Indian heritage. They must understand that there is a lot at stake here. Appropriation of Sanskrit through projection of the outsiders’ interpretation as the only authentic explanation means that our ‘grammar of civilization’ and the ‘metalanguage of Indian vernaculars (Prakrits)’ is at their mercy (BFS 14-23). Surprisingly, “several bright young Indians with elitist positions have already been trained in this approach to Sanskrit studies. These young scholars are deployed in key posts in India and elsewhere. They control many journals, conferences dissertation committees and other forums that shape the approach to Sanskrit and sanskriti” (BFS 26). That shows the gravity of the situation on the cultural front. The author-duo – Rajiv Malhotra and Vijaya Visvanathan also criticize parts of the NEP2020 claiming that these promote Woke ideas like the freedom to choose sexual role even at school level. In this context, one cannot forget Elon Musk’s plight when he declared that his son was dead!⁴

Malhotra stands out as an exemplary fighter in this scenario. His activism has aroused the ire of some leading American scholars like Martha Nussbaum, who targets Malhotra in her book *The Clash Within*. (SG 289). Malhotra’s unswerving espousal of Indian culture and its adjuncts has offended vested interests leading to institution of litigation against him but he continues his work fearlessly for which he deserves appreciation. He has often been criticized by left-leaning intellectuals as a conspiracy theorist.⁵ However, one can only arrive at truth through marshalling facts and not stepping into prejudices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be said that the arguments presented by Rajiv Malhotra and his co-authors are well supported by facts and evidence, even though there is a strong section of the intelligentsia who still toe the conventional line in respect of interpretation of history as done by Marxist historians like Romilla Thapar, R.S. Sharma et al. However, the interpretations by nationalist historians like R.C.

Majumdar, P.V. Kane et al are attracting young intellectuals and general public in India. The exploitative tendency in the West or in America is strong as ever. In this context, the observation of the Indologist Koenraad Elst is apt: “Once upon a time, the colonizers brought prized artworks to museums in the West, claiming that these were safer there than in the care of the irresponsible natives. Now, their successors try to carry away the adhikara (prerogative) to interpret Sanskrit texts...” (BFS III). The west does not realize that the study of Sanskrit texts is not simply reading another text, it is intimately related to Sadhana (BFS 15) that enables one to rise to the spiritual level to appreciate and benefit from the classics.

Malhotra is critical of the Indian philanthropists who, because of their education abroad, feel enamoured of the Western academy and fund projects, departments or chairs in those universities, giving unwanted support to partisan views. Renowned Indologist Prof. Kapil Kapoor rightly sums up the yeoman service being done by Malhotra to the cause of upholding Indian culture, commenting that Malhotra unravels the dirty games played by western academy actively supported by some NGOs and even governments in furthering these ideologies in order to negate the pride of place to this ancient civilization which is acknowledged to be the only one to have retained its culture out of the 46 ancient civilizations listed by UNESCO. (BFS IV).

Notes

1. Oxfam International's report highlights how the UK extracted USD 64.82 trillion from India during colonial rule, most of which was transferred to the richest 10 per cent in England. The exploitation by multinational corporations, rooted in colonialism, continues causing modern-day inequalities, especially impacting workers in the Global South. (“UK extracted”)
2. Sam Pitroda, the president of the Overseas Congress (an offshoot of the Indian National Congress) commented during the 2024 Indian parliamentary elections: “We could hold together a country as diverse as India – where people in the East look like Chinese, people in the West look like Arabs, people in the North look maybe White, and people in the South look like Africans” (Singh). This comment was ridiculed in India for its naivete and divisive approach.
3. David Thoreau along with Ralph Emerson and Walt Whitman form the Transcendentalist group in American literature, all of whom show impact of Indian culture. Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* describes the vision that he had of the trinity of Hinduism – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh – seated on the well from where he drew water while he stayed away from civilization. T.S. Eliot’s famous poems *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* actually quote Upanishadic maxims. Eliot mentions in a letter to his friend Nobert Wiener: “There are obviously certain Indian influences on my writing, at least on some of my poetry. I spent two years when in the Graduate School at Harvard studying Sanskrit and one year studying Pali. I read in Sanskrit the Maha Bharata, several of the Upanishads...”
<https://tseliot.com/preoccupations/philosophy>

4. Elon Musk's school going transgender child chose to be a girl and the school facilitated the transformation through administration of puberty blockers on the plea that the child had the right to determine his sexual role. However, Musk claimed that he was deceived into agreeing to puberty blockers and attributed the transformation to the "woke mind virus". ("Tesla CEO")
5. A scholar Andrew Nicholson had earlier levelled allegation of plagiarism against Rajiv Malhotra, to which Malhotra issued an effective rebuttal, pointing out that he had duly credited the source. ("Rajiv").
14. "UK extracted \$64.82 trillion from India during colonial rule. Richest 10% got most of the cash". The Economic Times, Jan 20, 2025. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/uk-extracted-64-82-trillion-from-india-during-colonial-rule-richest-10-got-most-of-the-cash/articleshow/117394631.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=ext&utm_campaign=cppst

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