
Masculinity as Power of Socio-Historical Concept in American Frontier

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ABSTRACT:

In the aftermath of a very successful feminist movement in America, the time now ripe to ask questions about masculinity in American society and culture. This present paper argues that because the frontier experience dominated American history, American civilization developed mainly as a male civilization with a distinct masculinity culture. Out of this distinct social and cultural milieu a concept of masculinity evolved. For a fuller understanding of this concept and as a point of comparison and reference, Indian thought related to masculinity is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION:

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development (Turner 1966: 544). When the westward moving settlers separated themselves from the Old World, the frontier sprang into existence. Chronologically, the westward movement began in the colonial period. The earliest settlers tried to reconstruct European culture on the eastern sea-coast with modifications to suit New World conditions. Around 1725, backwoodsmen across the western borders of some of the colonies began to exhibit distinctive characteristics which were to become the mark of the American frontiersman. Till the year before 1900, when the frontier may be said to have closed, waves of immigrants continually fed the stream of settlers advancing ever westward, thereby creating a distinct civilization.

During the 1890s, a mood of increasing restlessness and ensuing developments made it clear that an important chapter in America's history was coming to a close. With the pressing demand for laws that would close America's gates to European immigrants, came the pronouncement in the 1890 by Director of the Census that an unbroken frontier line no longer exist in the West. Taking his clue from this, Frederick Jackson Turner presented his phenomenal "frontier hypothesis" in 1893. For the first time he asked questions like, 'how have three centuries of constant expansion altered the thought, the character, and the institutions of the American people?' Could the unique features of Americanness be explained mainly by the repeated "beginning over again" as society moved ever westward? Since Turner's thesis, the powerful impact of America's historical experience has been accepted. From time of the first settlement it was acknowledged that Heaven and Earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation. The motto *Go West young man and grow up with the country* profoundly affected the American scene. In American cultural psyche the West became simultaneously a land promise and a land of savagery. Defining the landscape, the American had to define himself. Barbarism and brutalism were inevitable New World experiences. In this historical context American civilization developed mainly as a male civilization; women existed only in supportive roles.

The process of subduing the wilderness produced the Americanization of a people. Debunking the theory of Germanic origins and also the theory of European germs developing in an American environment, Turner set forth the Americanization factor (ibid: 545-546):

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a Europe in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and the Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and ploughing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.

Man must accept the environment or perish; a new product that is American was born. The reality of the frontier society decides the Western type.

In the valleys of the New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Carolinas, settlers penetrated the great forested areas and encroached on Indian villages and hunting grounds. Ahead of the cabin settlers advanced Indian traders, land scouts, and hunters travelling long distances over long period of time. Having sharp eyes for land in large, speculative blocks, most of them were infected by land fever. With these adventurers and ever more cabin settlers, the civilization line thrust forward. These settlers did not conform to any single social or cultural pattern, but certain common conditions developed identifiable traits. The major characteristics were: isolation from the “outside”, crudity of living conditions, absence of Old World social grace, self-denial, the will and ability to adjust and adapt to primitive conditions, a sense of humour, as well as of predestination, a sense of neighbourliness, an insatiable curiosity, and an unflinching courage and optimism (Clark 1984:118). The frontiersman had to reckon with great distance without convenient transportation. He had to perform the arduous task of advancing across densely wooded land to the plains. He was primarily confined to an agricultural economy. All this demanded tremendous physical strength and an unsurmountable will to conquer.

On the basis of available statistics, we know that the backwoods population was sparse through the whole frontier history. There were more men than women, the young and early middle- aged group were more numerous, and the life span was relatively short. Circumstances were such that even though flowing from many national origins- English, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Dutch, German, Scandinavian, French and Eastern European- the frontiersmen fused into a common stock. They spoke a common language, English, and anglicized their names. At the same time, institutions, folklore, tastes and traditions reflected their cosmopolitan background, adapted to frontier conditions.

Able-bodied young men were an asset in frontier society. They were expected to marry early and raise big families for survival. Men’s and boy’s favourite amusements were hunting, rifle shooting, foot racing, and watching cock-fighting, bear baiting, and dog fights. They enjoyed joking, telling tall tales, and talking politics. Bragging was their special characteristic. The frontierswoman had arduous responsibilities. In addition to housekeeping, she also worked as field hand in most cases. Frontier women were not placed on a pedestal by men. Courtship always presupposed the rearing of large families. Thus the frontier life was purely masculine

in nature, and society was boisterous. As Clark (ibid: 123) notes, the moment settlers' wives appeared in an area there began a process of elementary refinement. With women developed the churches, schools and town institutions.

Historians record how early pioneer had to live a rugged, distinctly masculine life. The hunters and Indian traders who crossed the Appalachians to hunt in the rich Ohio Valley adopted many characteristics of the Indians. The mountain men who travelled into the upper Missouri headstreams, into the Rocky Mountains, and along the Green and Snake River tributaries in search of furs were compelled to live highly celibate live; at best they had common-law marriages with Indian women. They were forced to stay indoors and live in isolation. Similarly those boats men and traders who lived on the rivers were rowdy. Isolated from human association for long periods, they faced many perils.

The discovery of gold in 1849 in California began a gold rush and brought mining camps into existence. Similarly railroad construction camps were earthly places. Primitive used to be the norm along with lawlessness and disregard of conventional, moral and social codes. Dramatically expanding ranches all over the Western Plains around 1860s made the cowboy reign supreme. The cowboy was indeed the rugged American individualist on horseback. He became a powerful symbol of masculinity in America. Describing the cowboy, Clark wrote:

He was a good horseman, a durable pioneer, a lad who became largely inured to trouble, who liked liquor, could eat miserable food, and could play havoc with the piece of raw, heartless cow town.

Another hardy pioneer was the hard boot lumberman, who followed the trail of the great pine forest westward. From Maine to Washington the lumberman slashed virgin stands of timber to the ground, cut the timber into lumber, and moved on. The lumber camps were centres of hard work and hard living, entirely devoid of any refinement. Men worked, drank, swore, fought, and spent their money freely.

In the emergence and growth of Americanism, the frontier experience proved the most vitally important factor. It was the frontier that produced American democracy and individualism, the main source of American opportunity. "So long as free land exist, and economic power secure political power." The line which was the frontier "promoted the information of a composite nationality for the American people." Taking European man and stripping him of most of his cultural baggage, the frontier subordinated him to the discipline of the wilderness and imposed upon him a set of new habits and institutions. It was the frontier that developed the essentially American traits- coarseness and strength, acuteness, inventiveness, restless energy, and a "masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends"(Hofstadter1968:4). All these traits strictly conform to the ideology of masculinity. The attributes of harshness and violence, intellectual and artistic sterility became the offshoots in American life and culture. In the physical sense the frontier was a savage environment: it generated a need to master, to conquer and to gain power. The sheer movement, migration, and repetition of the ever –occurring pioneer experience proved decisive in the formation of the male character.

Engulfed in the onward rushing torrent, fur traders, herders, and pioneers, middle-and or far-westerners, changed: i.e., they became individualistic, optimistic and ambitious, rough and ready and careless of niceties, nervous and restless and... best of all, idealistic(Pearson1968:20)

This process of civilization led to a kind of sexual tension in American life. Lasswell (1956:86) believed that this tension was due in part to the process of western settlement which “introduced housewives and schoolmarm into wide open spaces where men were men (emphasis mine) and women had been distant fantasies or immediate bargains.” The uprooting of boys and girls or peasants from the ties of primary neighbourhood had been very important.

The frontier experience in American history provided particularly fertile field for fuller exercise of masculinity and thus for creation of a dominant male culture. Webster’s dictionary defines the word ‘masculinity’ as having qualities regarded as characteristic of men and boys, as strength, vigor, boldness, manly, virile.” Manliness is considered to have the qualities of being strong, virile, brave, resolute, and honourable. Manliness is also associated with having power and authority. Masculinity thus applies to qualities characteristic of men or to things culturally appropriate to the male of the human species biologically distinguished from the female sex of the same species.

Masculinity as a concept has evolved over centuries based on human experience, cultural patterns, religious beliefs and social psychology born of economic determinism. In religious systems and mythologies, certain attributes have been assigned to masculine being. Certain natural symbols also express the characteristics of the masculine self. The universal natural symbols are: sky, peaks, mountains, thunder, rain, and certain horned beasts as well as creatures and fight like eagles. Religious systems also attribute cosmic functions to masculine entities. Gods, not goddesses, are creation of the mundane universe, invention of the elements of moral subsistence, and establishment of moral codes. The higher masculine values include order, stability, permanence and essentiality. These further serve as model and sanction for the pursuit of distinctive life patterns on the part of men and women (Eliade1987:252).

Indra, one of the highest gods in the Vedic religion of ancient India, is a good illustration of higher masculine attributes. Indra is an atmospheric divinity. He is credited with the unleashing of rain and storms, expressive of the masculine fecundating force. Indra personifies cosmic vitality. He fertilizes the earth and makes rivers, sap, and blood alike to circulate; his retinue are the winds. He is sagacious; his power is sovereign; in iconography he wears a crown. He is the prototype of the ruler. He also exemplifies the values pertaining to the relationship of ruler and ruled (ibid: 252).

Masculinity is also associated with primordially. The Arapaho of North America, for instance, believe in a supreme god out of whom the entire manifest world originated. The name for him is Spider because the spider weaves his web out of himself. The being that first emerges from the cosmic mass is masculine. In world mythologies, masculine first beginnings are abundant. The supreme god of North America is Amotken- “the old one”. Among the Hawaiians, the supreme male divinity is the god who dwells primordially. Again for Gilbert Islanders the earliest being is a male divinity, Na Areean the Elder. In Australian religions, during the primordial time called the Dreaming, the first beings called Great Men, who are fathers to the present world creatures, roamed the earth.

In mythology, feminine being tends to be secondary to masculine being. In the Navajo creation myth, First Man is paired with First Woman; both emerged from the union of primordial mists, but the emergence of First Woman follows that of First Man. In mythology, masculinity precedes femininity. Eve emerges out of the body of Adam, not Adam out of Eve.

Again religious systems attitude height, corollaries of ascendancy and transcendence, to masculinity. Mircea Eliade points out in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) that belief in the celectiality of the divine being is universal in religious systems. And in religion and mythology divine beings are overwhelmingly masculine. Sky is the most fundamental natural symbol of masculinity. The supreme god of the Maori is Io, meaning “raise up” or on high. Amotken is also a celestial god, living in the crown of the cosmic tree. In the Tantric tradition of southern Asia (Nepal, India, Tibet), the sublime is taken to be masculine and access to him demands techniques of focusing and directing upward the feminine energies of the physiological microcosmos. In Hinduism, there are many instances when the sublime comes to the mundane world by his wilful descent, called avatara. Thus Lord Vishnu mercifully descended upon the earth to be born, as King Rama, as the rambunctious cowherd with divine descent. With height, the idea of loftiness is associated with masculinity. We have instances of mythical Mount Meru, Greek Olympus and certain peaks in Japan. Height and loftiness as masculine attributes find expression in the symbolism of sky-dwelling creatures. The eagle is an example. The Bell Coola of north-west coastal America believe in an axis mundi or sacred pole connecting heaven and earth, created by the highest god and topped by a seated eagle. In North America and in some parts of Siberia an eagle-like “Thunderbird” is a powerful symbol of masculinity.

Again effulgence is a common attribute suggested by the natural symbolism of sky. Lord Siva is described as the “shining one” and as “the lord white as jasmine”. In Navajo mythology the First Man and First Woman arose in radiance, the former in the place of sunrise and the latter in the place of sunset. The fire that they burn lit the firmament, but the light of the First Man was stronger.

Yet another phenomenon of the culture hero contributes to the development of masculinity culture. He is defined as “a type of supernatural who mediates between a withdrawn cosmic father figure and the mundane sphere” (ibid:255). Almost without exception he is portrayed as a male. His activities are varied and he assists in the work of creation. A culture hero is widely revered in North America who, at the instance of the high god, brings up the first land from the primal waters. Another typical task of the culture hero is to provide the elements of culture and the basic tools for subsistence to man. Among the Pacific Northwest peoples and in eastern Siberia, the culture hero “Raven” brings light and various elements of culture to the mundane world. To succeed, he becomes a schemer or a trickster. He steals water, sun or other subsistence material. Prometheus exemplifies this aspect in Greek mythology. The culture heroes are the sacred ancestors of human descent. In religious systems there is a belief that

sacred substance, as an imminent component and inheritance of human individuals, is masculine- that is, it is derived from a high god, is transmitted by supernatural males acting in sacred times as ancestors of men, and is passed along in profane time through the male descent line.

Accordingly, in Hindu social theory and law, men alone pass the sacred substance of their lineage to their descendants, whereas the sacred substance inherited by a woman is not immutable as it is transformed to correspond to that of her husband at the time of marriage. Thus, then, woman transmits no sacred substance to her offspring of her own but only that of her husband.

The natural symbolism of the sky overlaying and embracing the supine earth powerfully suggests the immanence of masculine principle. A sexual dichotomy is featured in the sky being associated with masculine and the earth with feminine. Earth and sky together constitute the cosmic pair. Masculinity then is widely associated with generative land fecundating powers. This seems to be based on the natural functioning of the sky. This association is very clearly evident in one ritual of ancient India: Brihadaranyaka Upanishad enjoins the husband to unite with the wife after uttering “I am the heavens, thou, the earth”. The creative and generative capacity is symbolized in high god Siva in Hinduism. Bulls are a particularly common symbol of fecundity. Siva’s cosmic vehicle is a fabulous bull, and the bull is also the form assumed by Zeus in the early Greek myth of Europe’s ravishment. Also, even in present times, Siva is invoked as a powerful creative force in Hindu marriage rites.

Out of the attributes credited to masculinity, a gender dichotomy emerges. The usual tendency is to associate the masculine with stability and essentiality, and the feminine with change and materiality. The masculine may be identified with being’s inner form (thought or structure) while the feminine is identified with being’s outer forms (word or substance). The masculine may be associated with the potential inactive form of being; the feminine, with kinetic, active being. The masculine is one and integrated; the feminine is plural diffused (ibid: 257)

In Yoga and Samkhya religious philosophies of India, the universe is said to be on a polarity of two metaphysical principles. The masculine principle, purusa which means “male” or “man”, is that of immanent and essential being, whose nature is immutable. On the other hand, the feminine principle is associated with sakthi, the energy that activates the ever changing material universe. The masculine deprived of its sakthi is compared to lifeless god, while the feminine principle out of balance with the masculine is said to be rampant, capricious, and dangerous.

In Indian thought related to masculinity, the concept of Purusa is of immense importance. Purusa is a Sanskrit term meaning “person” or “man”. But the world has acquired independent meaning in the Indian intellectual history. Purusa means “the first man, self”, and “consciousness.” In the ultimate analysis, it connotes the concepts of atma (self), and barman (universal self), and ksetrajna (knower). The interrelationships and discussion of these concepts can be traced through the Upanishads and the epics, in the work of the Buddhist writer Asvaghosa, in the medical work of Caraka, and in the texts of Samkhya philosophy.

For the first time purusa occurs in the Rigveda composed toward the end of the period from 1500 to 900 BC. Hymn 10.90 refers to the first man from whose bodily parts sprang the different groups of society (varnas) based on the division of labor:

Brahmanosya mukhamasid bahu rajanyah krtha
Uru tadasya yad vaisyah padbhayam sudro ajayata.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1900-700 BC) refers to the term in the sense of the first man, whose essence is entirely self.”In the beginning this world was self (atma) alone in the form of a Person(purusa). When purusa first came into existence he became aware of himself and exclaimed, “I am”(1.4.1). Both atman and brahman inherit the function of creation from the original purusa, the first man. Such examples in the case of atman are found in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10, and in the case of brahman in Brihadaranyaka

Upanishad 1.11.16. In various creation myths the descriptions of how “one”, describing to be many, multiplied itself, forming a new creation are to be found in abundance.

Change and creation were not; however, the primary functions of the concept of *purusa*. In Indian thought system *purusa* took on other functions, while the function of creation came to be associated with prakriti (materiality). Thus, although *purusa* served at one time as the foundation of the whole universe, it was also instrumental in establishing materiality, an opposing concept forwarded by the Samkhya school. Together, *purusa* and prakriti constituted the essential entities of Samkhya. In Samkhya thought *purusa* became a contentless consciousness and the exact opposite of materiality. Consciousness is considered as uncaused and is not itself a cause; it is eternal, without space, without motion, without substratum, without parts, independent, differentiated, and unproductive. The purpose of consciousness (*purusa*) is to lend consciousness to materiality and thus justify the very existence of materiality. By its mere presence, consciousness is the “passive witness” (*saksin*) of materiality, beneficiary of the activities of materiality, and makes the ordinary experience meaningful. In Samkhya philosophy, *purusa* is instrumental in achieving the highest aim of liberation. Liberation comes from the knowledge whereby one distinguishes between two entities: contentless consciousness (*purusa*) and materiality (*prakriti*) as essentially different things. Thus in Indian thought systems, masculinity in the ultimate analysis leads to the highest mystical experience leading to Truth.

Then there are certain other historical and cultural phenomenon’s in human civilization which are integrally associated with masculinity. War and the attributes of warriors have significantly contributed to the evolvement and nature of the masculine factor. War has been defined as “organised and coherent violence conducted between established and internally cohesive rival groups” (Eliade 1987:339). Without exception, war is a masculine activity. This is the most extreme form of competition between different groups, inevitably male, for scarce resources such as women, territory, movable articles, or the labour power of subjugated populations. War has been idealized from ancient times through folklore as well as such epics as Iliad, Mahabaratha and Ramayana. In the same context, great prestige has been assigned to the acts of valor, valiance, value, virtue and virility. Etymologically, these words are connected with the meaning “to be strong”, “be worth”, “power”, and “manliness”. And the ancient Indian war god Indra (Thor), thunderbolt wielder par excellence, and the heroes like Arjuna, Herakles, Siegfried, Cu Chulainn, Arthur, and Achilles promote the masculine culture in their respective traditions.

In the same tradition, the institution of war and warriors is associated with the institution of kingship. In the belief system, the war leader, or reg from which Latin rex, Sanskrit raj, old Irish rig derive (ibid: 345), lead to the concept of secular authority, necessarily a masculine characteristic and preoccupation. Kingship is centred upon the person of one man. If this authority is entrusted to a woman, who occurs very rarely, she is ritually identified with and treated as a man. Again the institution of kingship emphasizes the centrality of man in the universal order.

With feminist philosophy recently added to perspective on human civilization, a feminist critique of masculinity by giving new dimensions to maleness. This has diverted the mainstream of Western culture. In this culture according to Simone de Beauvoir, woman was the Other- different, alien, and abnormal. Now, if the table is turned, and women are taken as normal, then men and masculinity become the other (Lerner 1979: 31). Keeping woman at

the centre, men become objects of analysis to explain their “degree of deviancy from the female” (Eisenstein 1984:96). Discussing asymmetry in gender identity, Nancy Chodorow holds that male gender identity is conflictual and difficult. Boys, as they grow, have to develop as “non-females”. Chodorow (1985: 3-19) argues that men compensate for a relatively fragile sense of masculinity by ensuring that power stays in the hands of males; because of masculine “cultural hegemony” they elevate maleness into the definition of human normality. Hester Eisenstein accepts Chodorow’s analysis of male gender development as a fruitful source for understanding certain aspects of masculinity in Western culture. Further, Evelyn Fox Keller argues that modern Western science is genderized. It overwhelmingly associates in a cultural sense with maleness and masculinity. This has required scientific investigation to be carried out in a particular way and in a specific direction. Culturally, this gives rise to a masculine code (Keller 1978: 415):

The characterization of both the scientific mind and its modes of access to knowledge as masculine is indeed significant. Masculine here connotes, as it so often does, autonomy, separation, and distance. It connotes a radical rejection of any commingling of subject and object, which are ...quite identified as male and female.

Keller finds the simple –minded association of science and masculinity as a distortion, affecting the choice of paradigms. Citing the work of Barbara McClintock on the operation of DNA, Keller (1982: 599) says that the work was largely rejected by the scientific community because McClintock saw the structure as interactive with organism it inhabited, rather than as dominating and controlling it in a hierarchical manner. It is agreed that science as it has developed has its dangers and, according to feminist perspective, this status is linked to male psychology and male dominance. Jessica Benjamin (1985:63) calls it “rational violence” when she writes:

.....male rationally and individually are culturally hegemoni,.....Further,..... male rationally and violence are linked within institution that appear to be sexless and genderless, but which exhibit the same tendencies to control and objectify the other out of existence that we find in the erotic form of domination.....the male posture in our culture is embodied in exceedingly powerful and dangerous form of destructiveness and objectification.

Thus, “a woman-centred analysis presents maleness and masculinity as a deformation of human and as a source of ultimate danger to the continuity of life”(Eisenstein 1984:101).

CONCLUSION:

The Frontier in American history has repeatedly provided a testing ground for human mettle, an open field for exercising and developing the attributes and traits of masculinity in America. Also it provided a prime example of work-karma or action as life philosophy. In the Bhagavadgita, the Blessed Lord said (Radhakrishnan 1948:132) *Loke’smin dvividha nistha/ pura prokta maya ‘nagha/ jnanayogena samkhyanam/ karmayogene yoginam.* (O, blameless One, in this world a two-fold way life has been taught of yore by Me, the path of Knowledge for men of contemplation and that of works for men of action).

On the frontier man exemplified the second way of life. Because the action performed in the frontier phenomenon is not without desire of result, the nature of man that emerges is the nature of “passion”. As in the Bagavadgita (ibid: 360) : *Rig karmaphalaprepsu/ lubbdho himsatmako sucih/ harsasokanvitah karta/ rajsah parikir itah.* (The doer who is swayed by passion, who eagerly seeks the fruit of his works, who is greedy, of harmful nature, impure, who is moved by joy and sorrow- he is said to be of “passionate” nature).

The characteristics associated with the ideology of masculinity are supremacy, loftiness, primodality, ascendancy and creative generative capacity. The masculine being is the giver of permanent institutions of culture, law and moral code. He is associated with stability and essentiality. He is pursuer and knower of truth, capable of achieving mystical heights. The male attributes of valor, valiance, value, virtue, virility, violence and power have evolved universally through the civilization process. But due to specific conditions certain masculine traits become accentuated on the American scene.

The Aryans underwent somewhat similar experience during the settlement process in the beginning of the Indic civilization. The traits giving identity to American man appear very prominent because the frontier in America is a relatively recent phenomenon in the world history.

The American experience of frontier establishes direct links with the American dream of success and predominantly masculine endeavours. The frontier experience tested and proved the male fiber. It also developed the national character of confidence and positivism so that America could face any sort of challenge and conquer it. Negatively, the predominance of masculinity has promoted violence and all its associated destructiveness, wasteful attitudes towards natural resources causing serious global ecological threats, and abuse of science posing serious dangers to the very continuity of human life.

Though the frontier in physical terms ceased to exist around 1890, it continues as an important American philosophy associated with the unquenchable thirst for adventure, exploration and opening new frontiers; space programs and America’s world economic policies can be viewed as an ever continuing American frontier. The frontier as part of public consciousness is manifest in the New Nationalism of Theodore Roosevelt, the New Freedom of Woodrow Wilson, the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Fair Deal of Harry Truman. Franklin Roosevelt declared (cited in Boorstin 1966:569-70).

Equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. Our task now is not the discovery or exploitation of natural resources or necessarily producing more goods. It is.... of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come.

John F. Kennedy adopted “the New Frontier” as a slogan for his administration, and Lyndon B. Johnson proclaimed his predecessor’s frontier as only the borderland of the Great Society. Ronald Reagan’s promise of “a new beginning” added a new economic dimension to the concept. Bill Clinton said Americans expect their president to serve as the nation’s premier legislative leader. America as an enterprise continues.

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