

Cultural Exchange and Economic Cooperation as Drivers of Ethnic Harmony: A Case Study of the Gandara Area of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka comprises multiple ethnic groups, and promoting social cohesion remains a perpetual task, despite the existing constitutional guarantee that everyone will be treated equally and have their religious rights protected. Although most analyses carried out in Sri Lanka have focused on the relationship between the dominant ethnic group, the Sinhalese, and the other ethnic group, the Tamils, surprisingly, few studies concentrate on the coexistence of other ethnic groups, particularly the Muslims, with the dominant ethnic group, the Sinhalese, in Sri Lanka. This study will examine cultural coexistence and economic coexistence in the Gandara East Grama Niladhari Division, where, despite being a region that consists of two different ethnicities (Sinhalese and Muslims), there have been no recorded instances of severe ethnic tensions. With the adoption of Cultural Integration Theory, Economic Interdependence Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Social Capital theory, along with a

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qualitative methodological design that focuses on a case study, this analysis will provide valuable insights through interviews, observational studies, and existing literature, targeting 55 respondents. The results show that cultural coexistence, achieved through joint celebrations, different forms of religious practices, sports events, mutual household assistance, and participation in funerals, has helped prevent severe ethnic tensions. Economic interdependence further cements this form of coexistence, achieved through joint fishing practices, shared economic activities, and debt-free economic collaborations. However, this analysis also highlights other emerging issues, such as the heightened insecurity experienced following the events of Easter, as well as occasional discomfort felt by the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, regarding the use of loudspeakers in the Muslims' mosques. Although these issues may seem less severe, they confirm that matters related to ethnic coexistence remain a fragile topic, requiring continual dialogue across different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: *Gandara, harmony, multi-ethnic, Muslim, Sinhalese*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is identified as a plural society that consists of different ethnic and religious affiliations. This is reflected in the makeup of its population, with the ethnic composition being composed of most Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, alongside the dominant religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Although the continent's constitution addresses this pluralistic value with considerations that address issues such as freedom of religion, as well as the non-discrimination aspect, there remain issues regarding full participation.

Sri Lanka is a multiculturally diverse country, but historical documents related to ethnic-based controversies were scant until the eruption of the war between the Sri Lankan Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that continued for a record 30 years. Even though this war was not predominantly between the two ethnicities, its occurrence drew more attention to ethnic-based sense. "Ethnic harmony," "ethnic co-existence," "social cohesion," or "inter-cultural dialogue" terms, particularly with respect to the two main ethnicities, "Sinhalese" and "Tamils" in Sri Lanka. But regarding

the "Muslim" ethnic group, which is the third largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, they have been co-existing for thousands of years, establishing ethnic associations with other ethnic groups of Sri Lanka. But their pursuit of ethnic harmony is always overshadowed by the more dominant narratives that remain in ethnic relationships with "Sinhalese" and "Tamils" in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this research aims to explore the level of mutual understanding that takes place between "Sinhalese" and "Muslim" ethnicities, with a focus on cultural and economic aspects within the Gandara East Grama Niladari Division.

Theoretical Applications and Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Moving on to discuss the dynamics of ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka, this study incorporates several theoretical frameworks, which are as follows:

1. **Cultural Integration Theory:** This theory, which is based on the views of Emile Durkheim, argues that cultural integration is essential for ethnic cohesion. This requires group or collective consciousness, as ethnic harmony is determined through cultural knowledge as well as cultural integration (Bellah, 1973; Durkheim, 2008).
2. **Economic Interdependence Theory:** This theory focuses on how economic interdependence between ethnic groups might reduce the chances of conflict, thus resulting in a peaceful coexistence (Gurr, 1970; Mansfield & Pollins, 2003). Knowledge of the nature of economic interdependence is essential in cultivating harmony.
3. **Intergroup Contact Theory:** This theory follows that positive contact between different ethnic groups, often facilitated through joint economic endeavours, reduces prejudices. An important aspect of this theory is that collaborative efforts play a crucial role in bringing about positive, peaceful changes in society (Allport, 1954).
4. **Social Capital Theory:** This theory emphasizes the importance of networks and relationships formed through both economic and social interactions. Social Capital Theory posits that such networks can facilitate joint action and assistance within different ethnic groups, thereby enhancing their social dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993).

Literature Review

Observations have been made based on diverse perspectives regarding Sri Lankan Muslim communities. The historical perspective of coexistence among Sri Lankan Muslims was rooted within the realm of trade, migration, and cultural adjustments. Early literature stresses that Muslim traders established their settlements within Sri Lanka's coastal strip. Consequently, their adoption of cultural practices through intermarriage, bilingualism, and joint trading endeavors established a robust groundwork for ethnic cohesion, as they preserved their own religions, along with being engaged with the practices of both the ethnic Sinhalese and Tamils (Dewaraja, 1994; McGilvray & Raheem, 2011). By being traders, they were able to maintain a socially interconnected position that facilitated mutual dependency as well as harmony.

There is agreement that colonial governance in Britain did affect inter-ethnic relations through restructuring economic affairs, the distribution of economic resources, as well as job opportunities. Such issues as discrimination in favor of some ethnic communities, as well as the economic restructuring of coastal cities, generated economic competition (DeVotta, 2016). Although Muslims were not central participants in ethnic competition in the initial phases, changes in economic rights and job opportunities led them to compete with other ethnic communities (Phadnis, 1979). Thus, colonial legacies serve as stimuli that generate both inter-ethnic cohesion as well as tensions.

After the time of independence, ethnic dynamics were increasingly mediated through electoral politics. It is often asserted that Muslim elites began to identify with or align with the majority Sri Lankan governments as a strategy for guaranteeing their safety and representation (Ameerdeen, 2006). Although this led to greater Muslim representation within the national centers of power, this policy also contributed to being seen as opportunistic concerning other minorities, as well as fueling inter-minority tensions (Haniffa, 2008).

During the civil war, Muslims found themselves in a unique position, being allies of the state as well as being persecuted by the LTTE. The large-scale expulsion of Northern Muslims in 1990 led to a lingering trauma within the group (Hasbullah & Korf, 2013). Such a phase was

a reminder that Muslims remain allies of the state, as well as being victims of war, thus sustaining the position of the ‘third minority’ between the two other prominent ethnic groups.

The end of the war in 2009 marked a dramatic turn in ethnic affairs as the Muslim identity became a focus of nationalist discourse in Sri Lanka’s majority Sinhala-Buddhist population. Islamophobia began with the propagation of greater halal labeling, dress, use of loudspeakers in mosques, and demographics (Gunatilleke, 2018; Moorhead, 2018). The outbreaks of violence in Aluthgama (2014) and Digana (2018) demonstrate the transformation of hate speech and conspiracies into real violence (Minority Rights Group International, 2019). Then, in 2019, the Easter Sunday bombings further securitized the Muslim population (Subaideen, 2024).

Differently from the prevailing scholarship on the topic, which focuses largely on ethnic tensions, some literature points to spaces of harmony established through cultural exchange. Studies carried out along the coastal and rural areas highlight joint festivals, inter-religious visits, joint education events, sports events, as well as joint participation in life-cycle rituals such as funeral services (Wanningham & Falson, 2015). Such events facilitate frequent person-to-person interaction as well as serve as a psychological buttress to foster uniformity along ethnic lines (Salma, 2009).

There is a body of literature that establishes the link between economic cooperation and ethnic stability. There is also the fact that Muslims participate significantly in the distribution chain of fishing products, as well as other forms of commercial activity, with the Sinhalese, establishing interdependent economic relationships (Ali, 1997). Once such economic benefits accrue mutually, ethnic relations will positively coexist, though if economic competition turns negative or monopolistic, ethnic tensions may emerge (Gunasena, 2017; Klem, 2018).

Recent literature suggests that the relationship between the Sinhalese and Muslims must be seen as one of conditional harmony. Social relationships, culture, or economic necessity can facilitate coexistence, yet such relationships may well be undone if national-level politics or social media manipulations heighten fear (Stephen, 2014).

Although literature on the national level speaks extensively of the tensions between the Sinhala ethnic group and Muslims, and despite some studies reporting co-existence of the two ethnic groups in certain coastal areas, there is a lack of empirical studies of the joint impact of cultural interaction and economic collaboration on ethnic harmony between the two ethnicities in the Gandara East Grama Niladhari Division. Currently, literature fails to address the specifics of the endurance of co-existence in Gandara, in spite of national ethnic tensions.

Research Methodology

Justification for Selecting the Research Locality

Gandara East G.N. Division was selected as the case study for this research due to several interconnected reasons. To begin with, this is a multiethnic area with its own unique demographics: there reside 1,095 members of the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, along with 393 Muslims, who form a minority group concentrated near the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese (Resource Profile, 2021). Although Muslims form a minority group, there have been no ethnic clashes reported in this area.

Secondly, the economic structure of the village, which revolves largely around fishing, provides a perfect backdrop for studying economic interdependence between different ethnic communities. Economic activity, as well as job distribution, provides a practical scenario for testing the hypothesis that economic interdependency can be a unique factor for social cohesion. Finally, the cultural infrastructure, with the temple and the mosque, provides a perfect scenario to test the impact of cultural practices on inter-community interaction.

Moreover, historical evidence indicates that Gandara was a 'Gateway to the Kingdom,' implying the existence of contact between different peoples for many centuries (Interviews, 2024). Taking note of the population diversity, economic necessity, as well as cultural importance, this case study would specifically focus on Gandara East G. N. Division. The structured breakdown of local demographics and empirical sample representation is explicitly detailed in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Data Collection Methods

This is qualitative research, which focuses on using the principles of Interpretivism to uncover the experiences of ethnic co-existence. These were the considerations for the method chosen.

Literature Survey

In this literature review, primary as well as secondary sources were used. Primary sources included existing documents from the Devinuwara Divisional Secretariat Office. Secondary sources included published scholarly work, literature, and internet sources that highlighted the historical, cultural, and economic elements associated with the Gandara people in Sri Lanka. Thus, this survey gave the necessary background, which helped design the fieldwork.

Field Study

An important aspect of this was that it involved observation and in-depth interviews as a methodology for gathering primary information.

- **Observations:** Observations were conducted on daily interactions within the communities, economic endeavours such as fishing, as well as cultural practices.
- **Official interviews:** Interviews were carried out with 5 key administrative officers in the Devinuwara Divisional Secretariat to provide insights into governance, resource distribution, as well as a historical perspective on ethnic relationships.
- **Resident interviews:** Purposeful sampling helped identify 50 participants (Sinhalese: 30, Muslim: 20) for sufficient representation. Residents were posed open-ended questions on their experiences with cultural and economic coexistence, interaction, and practices.
- **Sampling Logic:** The participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting people with experiences related to inter-ethnic relationships, both male and female, of different ages, as well as different occupations. This would give a well-rounded perspective of the communities.

Coding and Data Analysis

The data was analyzed based on principles of grounded theory by systematically identifying patterns and themes from the qualitative data (Clark et al., 2021).

1. Transcription: The data received from the interviews and observations were converted into written text.
2. Open Coding: During the process of initial coding, open coding was carried out through line-by-line analysis of the text in the transcripts. Main identification was focused on concepts related to cultural and economic dimensions of ethnic coexistence.
3. Axial Coding: The process focused on receiving initial observations (codes) into categories to find connections between cultural behaviors and economic outcomes, ultimately showing a link between how different groups interacted and their level of cooperation.
4. Summary Code List: Core codes were developed and represented the research objectives:
 - Dimensions of cultural coexistence (rituals, celebrations, religious respect, language use, and social norms).
 - Economic aspects of coexistence (labour shared, business networks and co-operations, fisheries resource management, financial interdependence).

Data analysis progressed until the point of theoretical saturation, when no more themes or patterns could be obtained (Clark et al., 2021). Cross-verification was carried out in terms of comparing data collected from observations with data obtained from interviews and other sources.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical guidelines. The participants consented freely, anonymity was protected by coding rather than using identifiers, and cultural factors were taken into consideration by adapting to social norms and family patterns in society.

Summary

By choosing the research site of Gandara East G.N. Division, using intensive interviews, and employing systematic coding grounded in known theory (Allport, 1954; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Durkheim, 2008; Gurr, 1970; Mansfield & Pollins, 2003; Putnam, 1993), this research develops a nuanced understanding of Sinhala-Muslim communal life in cultural and economic terms.

Results and Findings

Quantitative Baseline Profiling

To maintain demographic data extracted from local divisional records and empirical frameworks are organized in the tables below. Table 1 outlines the population composition of the studied division, while Table 2 outlines the exact qualitative participant distribution profile.

Table 1 *Population Composition of Gandara East Grama Niladhari Division*

Ethnic Group	Total Population	Percentage Composition (%)
Sinhalese	1,095	73.59
Muslim	393	26.41
Total	1,488	100.00

Note. Data adapted from the Resource Profile of the Gandara East Grama Niladhari Division (Resource Profile, 2021).

Table 2 *Qualitative Informant and Sample Matrix*

Respondent Category	Sinhalese Inf.	Muslim Inf.	Total Selected	Sampling Methodology
Divisional Administrative Officials	—	—	5	Key Informant Selection
Local Village Residents	30	20	50	Purposive Sampling
Aggregate Sample Size	30	20	55	Theoretical Saturation Approach

Note. Empirical field research matrix compiles data across genders, age sets, and diverse professional categories to optimize interpretive rigor (Interviews, 2024).

Cultural Relations and Ethnic Harmony

Cultural coexistence in Gandara East is based on the social proximity that exists between the Sinhalese and Muslims in the region. The two social groups do not live in each other's isolation but are involved in each other's cultural affairs in ways that regularize diversity in society. The fusion of cultural rituals in the absence of assimilation pressures indicates the key tenants of Cultural Integration Theory, in which different social groups possess different cultural identities in spite of coexisting in a socially integrated setting (Durkheim, 2008). The shared practice of religious and cultural events in Gandara socially binds those in the region in such a way that "difference" in social membership does not pose obstacles.

Religious events are significant in helping create the foundations of harmony. For instance, during Muslim events like Ramadan, the mosque provides porridge that is distributed across Muslim and Sinhala families. The process involves Sinhala residents participating by donating coconuts and other necessary products to aid in the process. On the other hand, during major Buddhist events like Perahera, Muslims get involved as volunteers in providing flowers, lighting, and water to devotees (Interviews, 2024). These actions contribute towards the creation of the message that, instead of being causes of separation based on religion, religion should be seen as opportunities for connection.

The day-to-day interactions are highly influenced by the guidelines of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954). This theory asserts that regular significant contact between different social groups leads to reduced prejudice and enhanced positive perceptions. The children from both groups mingle together in the same schools, sports classes, and even in home tuition classes conducted in each other's houses. The females from both groups befriend each other and support each other through significant phases in life, like wedding ceremonies, the delivery of babies, and funerals. The social interactions are not just confined to being in contact in institutional settings but are conducted in informal home settings (Interviews, 2024). The consistency in contact hinders the formation of stereotypes in society and helps in the interpretation of shared social identity instead of separating based on ethnicity.

The enhancement of bridging social capital in terms of inter-ethnic trust and support further enhances the inter-ethnic harmony (Putnam, 1993). Whenever there is a death in either of the villages, irrespective of the religion to which the person belongs, the villagers come together and contribute food and manpower. Whenever there is a problem in the village or community, the matter gets sorted out among the respected elderly individuals in the village and not in the presence of the authorities, thus avoiding further escalation of conflicts. The temple and the mosque maintain proper communication regarding dates and times of events so that there are no disruptions in each other's proceedings (Interviews, 2024).

Despite this strong cultural affinity, community members admit the existence of simmering tensions. Following the Easter 2019 bombings, Muslim community representation in society diminished slightly out of concern regarding possible stigma, although suspicions emerged among the Sinhalese in Gandara based upon external political discourse (Subaideen, 2024). The Sinhala community's unease regarding the use of loudspeakers in prayer recitations from the mosque illustrates that cultural amity is constantly being negotiated. Yet the way in which the community voices dissatisfaction through discourse and not aggression reflects the existence of conflict-management capacities in society. Gandara, thus, embodies not a society that eschews conflicts but one that manages conflicts and in no way lets conflicts disrupt coexistence (Interviews, 2024).

Economic Relations and Ethnic Harmony

Economic cooperation provides a robust base for harmonious relations among the different ethnicities in Gandara East. The logic behind the Economic Interdependence Theory—that no country would consider attacking another if this would result in harming one's own economy through the absence of future shared gain—is reflected in the working relationship between both sides (Gurr, 1970; Mansfield & Pollins, 2003). The fishing sector is the backbone of the region's economy, and most fishermen are from the Sinhala community. The Muslim community relies on fish as food in addition to utilizing it in dried fish processing and other sea transport services (Gunaseena, 2017). This provides the Muslim community with ample business from the Sinhala fishermen. The Sinhala fishermen also rely on doing business with Muslim clients. There is thus continuous cooperation

between both groups due to economic dependence (Interviews, 2024).

The business interactions do not only involve the fishing industry but also reflect broader cross-ethnic business networks (Klem, 2018). The Muslim locals are known to have retail shops, textiles, spice shops, and food outlets, and quite a number of their client base are from the majority Sinhalese community. For instance, one sweet shop owner noted that watalappan and jelebi are mostly bought in bulk by most Sinhala businessmen. Similarly, vendors and fishermen from the Sinhalese community use transport from Muslim owners at reduced rates in collective transport services (Interviews, 2024). All these collectively reflect opportunities not only in terms of income but also social value, in that the livelihood of each depends upon the other. As discussed by Social Capital Theory, such networks can facilitate joint action and assistance within different ethnic groups, thereby enhancing their social harmony (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990).

Economic transactions based upon trust are another key aspect leading towards peaceful situations. Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that the positive contact between different ethnic groups, often facilitated through joint economic endeavours, reduces prejudices and brings about positive, peaceful changes in society (Allport, 1954). Muslim business community members are recognized as principals in clearing debts because of religious values that do not support unnecessary lending (Interviews, 2024). This spreads the mindset among the Sinhala merchant community members to lend products to the Muslim business community members freely. Conversely, the fishing community members belonging to the Sinhala ethnic group offer flexible instalment transactions in return for purchasing products from Muslim business companies (Interviews, 2024).

The cooperative reaction towards the challenges in the economy again illustrates the level of interdependence in this society. During the monsoon or when fishermen have accidents, both the Sinhalese and Muslim communities can financially contribute towards welfare through donations (Interviews, 2024). Even NGOs involved in the dissemination of school material like school bags, dry rations, and uniforms are able to distribute equally among both groups in such a way that there are no feelings of inequality in resource allocation. Recently, helping in the building of the local architectural works

through the use of Sinhala workers and through funding from Muslim businessmen again depicted that the well-being of everyone trumps interdependence (Interviews, 2024).

To conclude, the role of economic relations in Gandara East ensures that there is stability in inter-ethnic coexistence. Since each community relies upon the other in terms of livelihood safeguarding, fighting tends to be costly, while pursuing common goals turns out to be fruitful. This cultural trust enhances business partnership, and conversely, business partnership enhances cultural trust. Hence, there is more than just coexistence in economic interdependence.

The Gandara East example illustrates that harmony among different ethnic groups involves more than the absence of violence—it entails the presence of social, cultural, and economic ties strong enough that the temptations of conflict are overcome by the rewards of cooperation. Cultural practices beget respect; contact begets familiarity with difference; networks of trust beget collective responsibility; and shared economic prosperity begets collective benefit. This process, through cultural fusion and shared economic gain, generates a virtuous circle of peaceful coexistence.

Discussion

The empirical dynamics emerging from the study of Gandara East expand on traditional macro-narratives of communal friction within post-war Sri Lanka. At a structural level, the everyday micro-level mechanisms operating within this division reinforce the tenets of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) and Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1993). Rather than existing in localized segregation, the physical proximity of the two groups translates directly into what Putnam defines as bridging social capital—networks that link disparate community factions together through mutual civic dependency. When contrasted with national reports of post-2009 Islamophobia highlighted by Gunatilleke (2018) and Moorhead (2018), Gandara East serves as a resilient anomaly. Local conflict-management frameworks, driven by informal baseline networks such as shared tuition clusters, local athletic programs, and inter-religious neighborhood delegations, function effectively to filter out macro-level political propaganda.

Furthermore, the structural integration of the fishing and marketplace operations provides concrete empirical validity for Economic Interdependence Theory (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003). Local transactional mechanisms, including specialized credit systems and multi-ethnic transport arrangements, prove that local economic resilience is built directly upon the stability of cross-ethnic trust. This aligns closely with previous findings by Gunasena (2017) regarding the unifying capacity of coastal maritime industries. Frictions do manifest—specifically around the post-2019 securitization discourses noted by Subaideen (2024) and acoustic negotiations regarding mosque loudspeakers. However, because these friction points are processed through institutional dialogue between the local temple and mosque elders, they do not deteriorate into real-world violence. This emphasizes that sustainable harmony is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a static state of absolute consensus (Stephen, 2014).

Conclusions

In conclusion, one can clearly see that the findings of this study highlight the complex and dynamic nature of ethnic harmony between the Sinhala and Muslim communities in the Gandara East Grama Niladhari Division. Rather than being shaped by a single historical or cultural factor, harmony in this region emerges as a mosaic of shared experiences, evolving traditions, and mutual social responsibilities. The research demonstrates that despite occasional national-level tensions, the everyday interactions between the people in Gandara East are characterized by cooperation, co-existence, and respect.

This study describes cultural interaction as a factor that facilitates better inter-ethnic relations emerges as one of the most important aspects that come forth through this study. Moreover, the religious events, social events, food practices, and engagement with family events that happen through participating in family celebrations allow the establishment of emotional links between the two communities. These events serve as evidence through which individuals become aware of the other person's value systems, beliefs, and practices. Rather than focusing on their cultural differences, the culture of interaction that the Sinhalese and Muslim communities in Gandara East have established promotes 'both difference and unity.'

Equally, economic cooperation emerges as one of the vital pillars that facilitate ethnic harmony. Such aspects as trade partnerships, joint economic endeavours, marketplace interactions, as well as economic interdependence facilitate mutual need and trust. Cooperation that occurs in economic spaces emerges as that which makes individuals prioritize stability and peaceful co-existence, as evidenced in this study. In Gandara East, the economic space emerges as a neutral as well as safe space where both ethnicities come together for shared prosperity.

In addition, the fact that fieldwork takes place in this area highlights the value of leadership within this community as well as its social structures. Religious leaders, schoolteachers, youth group members, as well as other social group-based organizations within the community, play a proactive role in the prevention of conflict as well as intercultural dialogue. Social structures within this community demonstrate that this community favours cooperation as opposed to confrontation.

However, the research also recognizes that harmony between different ethnic groups is not always guaranteed. This was evident through the expressions of participants' concerns over outside factors such as political propaganda and media coverage, which may instil fear or suspicion of other ethnic groups. Although such factors do not occur within Gandara East, they may pose a threat to the existing relationships if not dealt with. Thus, ethnic harmony must be regarded as a dynamic process that requires constant attention.

This research concludes that the synergy that occurs between cultural interaction and economic partnerships represents the most important factor that facilitates ethnic harmony within the Gandara East. Cultural interaction brings together people through their increased proximity, enabling them to bond through their emotions, because of which mutual respect will be realized. Economic partnerships, on the other hand, ensure that there is economic harmony, which will provide a sound footing that will facilitate the co-existence of ethnic group members, such as the Muslims and the majority population within Gandara East, even during tensions.

Final Reflection

Gandara East provides more than a localized example: its experiences offer insights into peace-building in a multi-ethnic population. It illustrates that if the population is engaged with, working together, and participating in joint experiences, ethnic divisions will be celebrated as enriching diversity, as opposed to being tools for separation. Preserving such experiences, therefore, is imperative.

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