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Trailblazer in Academia: The Journey of an Assamese Woman in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Establishing a tradition of research in a fundamental science like Chemistry in Assam nearly six decades ago was undoubtedly a formidable challenge for a woman. Dr. Arunmoni Chaudhuri, former Professor and Head of the Department of Chemistry at Gauhati University, stands as one of the trailblazers in advancing research infrastructure in the field of Basic Organic Chemistry in Assam.Arunmoni Chaudhuri enrolled herself for research work in the University of Manchester, United Kingdom in 1952, where she was awarded the Doctorate degree in Organic Chemistry in 1955. After returning from Manchester, she was appointed Lecturer in Cotton College in 1956. In January 1958 she became a member of Faculty of Department of Chemistry in the recently fledged Gauhati University established in 1956 and earned the distinction of being the first lady science teacher of the University. In spite of all the teething problem of the University she took up the challenge in her stride and continued her research and also produced a number of superb research scholars ably competing with all her male counterpart and did not let anyone down. An accomplished woman, she did the perfect balancing act on her role as a wife of an equally illustrious husband and mother of two successful children.

This study seeks to explore the life of Dr. Arunmoni Chaudhuri, with a particular focus on her significant contributions to educational development and research.

Key words: Arunmoni, Higher Education,Manchester University, Gauhati University, Ortho-mercapto-azo, Sahitya Akademi.

INTRODUCTION

From the latter part of the last century to the present day, we have witnessed numerous inspiring stories of women of substance—women who have defied societal norms, broken barriers, and paved the way for future generations. The very expression *"women of substance"* has gained remarkable prominence in contemporary discourse, symbolizing strength, resilience, and a commitment to excellence. In today's world, this phrase carries profound significance, resonating with the global movement toward inclusivity and gender parity. It embodies not just success but also the integrity, intelligence, and perseverance that define true leadership. As

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societies continue to evolve, recognizing and celebrating such women reinforces the collective push for equality, ensuring that their contributions are acknowledged and their legacies inspire future generations.Dr. Arunmoni Chaudhuri's journey of life undoubtedly places her among the esteemed women who, through their exceptional work and dedication, made a profound impact on society.

Dr. Arunmoni's expertise lay in the field of science, and this aspect deserves to be emphasized. In today's world, where scientific advancements are widespread, the importance of science education for the general public hardly needs reiteration. This includes both men and women; however, in the past, women, unfortunately, did not actively engage with science education (*Arunmoni Chaudhurir Rachanawali*, p.99). Several factors contributed to this—outdated beliefs, financial constraints, and the burden of household responsibilities. Additionally, a significant reason was the prevailing perception that science education was only meant for technical or medical fields, primarily as a means to secure stable employment or succeed in competitive exams for prestigious positions. However, science is no longer restricted to laboratories or a select group of scientists. It has become an essential part of daily life and has seamlessly integrated with art and culture(*Arunmoni Chaudhurir Rachanawali*, pp.100-101).

There is a specific field forevery individual where they can perform their duties in the most effective way. However, examples of people who choose their field wisely and then excel in their responsibilities are relatively rare. It is important to highlight the achievements of such individuals. Around the time India gained independence, Assamese women made significant strides in education. However, the number of women who reached the highest levels of academia and professional success remained quite small. Those who did achieve such heights played a crucial role in shaping future generations, contributing to societal reforms and the advancement of education, all the while quietly fulfilling their responsibilities. Among this select group, a few dedicated women worked with unwavering determination and a clear sense of purpose. However, being averse to publicity, their contributions remain largely unrecognized. Many of them did not document their experiences in memoirs or autobiographies to share their accomplishments with the world.

This paper offers a unique perspective on the life and personality of the late Arunmoni Chaudhuri, drawing exclusively from her own writings and interviews conducted with her family. As a result, it stands as an original research endeavour.

METHODOLOGY

The work adopts a case study and relied on primary data including personal contact with Arunmani

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Chaudhari for long a period of time, interviews with close family members and personal Diary of Arunmoni Chaudhuri to delve into her contribution to Higher education.

EARLY LIFE

Arunmoni was born on August 27, 1928, in Uzanbazar, Guwahati. She came from a family with a strong creative heritage—her grand-uncle, Raghunath Chaudhari, was the renowned poet known as 'Bihogi Kabi' meaning the 'poet of birds'. The epithet is appropriate because all his writings are based on birds and nature. Her father, Umesh Chaudhuri, was a distinguished Chemistry graduate from Cotton College, earning first-class honours in the year 1917, and was also a celebrated lyricist. Her mother, Basundhara Chaudhuri, was a remarkable woman who provided unwavering support and encouragement to Arunmoni throughout her life.

Arunmoni's childhood was filled with joy and wonder, spent in the delightful company of her bachelor grand-uncle, Raghunath Choudhari. He played with her, shared countless stories, and made learning an enjoyable experience. As the eldest among her siblings—six younger brothers and one sister—she had a special bond with nature, nurtured by her grand-uncle's guidance. Under his fascinating mentorship, she discovered various bird and animal species, observing their behaviours, various types of calls, and means of communication. This close connection with the natural world sparked in her a deep love and compassion for it, inspiring her to compose small poems as she grew. Seeing her budding talent, her grand-uncle, a literary figure himself, hoped she would one day carry forward his legacy.

However, Arunmoni chose a career in science, greatly influenced by her father, who was a graduate with honours in chemistry in the early twentieth century. She excelled academically, passing her matriculation in 1943 from Panbazar Girls' High School, the first girls' high school in the region with star marks and distinction. Continuing her education, she completed her Intermediate Science (I.Sc.) with distinction from Cotton College, Guwahati in 1945. Encouraged by Professor S.C. Chakraborty, she pursued an honours degree (now known as Major) in Chemistry at Cotton College under Calcutta University. However, due to the political unrest of 1946-47, she had to abandon Calcutta and relocate to Banaras. There, she continued her academic journey, earning an M.Sc. in Chemistry from Banaras Hindu University in 1950, securing a First Class and ranking second in her class (*Diary of Arunmoni*, unpublished).

After earning her Master's degree, Arunmoni began her career as a Chemistry teacher at Lady Irwin College in New Delhi, joining the faculty in 1951. For a young woman from this relatively less developed region of India, travelling alone to a distant city like Delhi and work there was a bold and courageous step. Inthe short stint there, she gained popularity among both colleagues and students. That same year, on May 11, she tied the nuptial knot with Bhumidhar Choudhuri of Rangmahal, North Guwahati, who was a Physics teacher at Cotton College, Guwahati. It is worth mentioning that Bhumidhar Choudhury was the younger sibling of Lakhyadhar Choudhury the well-known multifaceted personality.

Following her marriage, Arunmoni's promising career faced an interruption, though employment was not a

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basic necessity for her. This was a common reality for many educated women of that era, as marriage often led to career disruptions, primarily due to relocation. While only a few were fortunate enough to restart their professional journeys, Arunmoni was among them (*Diary of Arunmoni*, unpublished). However, it was not mere luck that propelled her along—it was her unwavering determination, exceptional intellect, and well-timed decisions that paved the way for her comeback. Determined to continue her academic pursuits, she chose to delve into research in her favourite subject. She embraced the opportunity when her husband received an invitation from Manchester University in the United Kingdom. With her ambition and academic excellence, she made the courageous choice to embark on this new chapter.

At the time, obtaining a passport was a challenging process, with the nearest passport office located in Calcutta (now Kolkata). The procedure for grant of Visa included multiple vaccinations, as India was classified as a "highly dangerous and infectious zone." Traveling to London from Bombay (now Mumbai) involved a lengthy sea voyage that lasted around three weeks. The newly wed pair of Arunmoni and her husband sailed aboard the ‘Maloja,’ a ship operated by the P & O Line. With favourable currents, their journey was completed in twenty-two days, reaching the port of Tilbury. Upon arrival, three representatives from the education branch of the Indian Embassy in London welcomed them on behalf of the Indian High Commission.During their stay at Manchester University, the couple resided at 85, Guildford Street(diary of Arunmoni, unpublished).

Arunmoni successfully completed the necessary formalities and enrolled at the same university as her husband to pursue her doctoral studies. From 1952 to 1955, she conducted research under the guidance of the renowned scientist A. Burawoy, focusing on the synthesis of ‘ortho-mercapto’ compounds and analyzing their reactions and structures. Her research specifically explored the synthesis technology and reaction mechanisms of ‘ortho-mercapto-azo compounds,’ a subject of significant importance due to the growing role of sulphur-based organic compounds in medical science at that point of time. Her thesis was highly regarded and earned her the prestigious Petuck Prize in 1955 (an award given for the best thesis submitted by a foreign Ph.D. candidate at UMIST that year(*Cotton collegepast teachers*, p.92). What makes her achievement even more remarkable is that she accomplished all this while conceiving, giving birth and caring for a newborn—her daughter—born during the time both she and her husband were engaged in research at the same university, one in Chemistry and the other in Physics.

Given their outstanding academic credentials, the university offered them teaching and research positions. However, driven by their deep sense of commitment to their homeland, the couple chose to decline the offer, deciding instead to return and serve the people back home.

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Upon returning home, Arunmoni joined Cotton College as a lecturer in 1956. By then, Gauhati University had been established, and in January 1958, she became a faculty member in its Department of Chemistry, earning the distinction of being the university's first female teacher. Over time, she rose through the ranks and was eventually promoted to professor and Head of the Department (*Cotton College past teachers*, pp-92-93).

Arunmoni converted the challenges faced by the fledgling university into opportunities to bask in its shining glory with deep determination. She not only continued her research but also mentored and produced outstanding research scholars. Competing on equal footing with her male colleagues, she proved her excellence in the field, never allowing obstacles to hinder her contributions to academia.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Establishing a strong research tradition in a fundamental science like Chemistry in Assam some seven decades ago was undoubtedly a daunting challenge for a woman. Dr. Arunmoni Chaudhuri, definitely played a pioneering role in developing research infrastructure in the field of Basic Organic Chemistry in Assam. It is worth noting that during the early years of its existence, Dr. Krishna Kanta Handique, the first Vice Chancellor of Gauhati University was reluctant to encourage research activities fearing that research work might disrupt the regular M.Sc. classes and emphasized that teaching should remain the primary focus of faculty members. Notwithstanding suchstand by the authorities, Arunmoni and her colleagues took itas a challenge with determination. They successfully balanced both teaching and research, eventually earning commendation from the Vice Chancellor himself. Arunmoni was a proud member of this elite group of researchers. She played a pivotal role in advancing research at Gauhati University, often working independently to build infrastructure, organize academic activities, mentor her colleagues, and guide junior faculty members. Her relentless efforts led to the establishment of a strong research school focused on sulphur organic compounds in the Chemistry laboratory of the Gauhati University. Her contributions to the field were widely recognized at that time, and she got numerous research papers published in prestigious international and national chemistry journals.

Beyond research, Arunmoni was deeply committed to spreading scientific knowledge among the younger generation. She authored several popular science books in Assamese, making complex scientific concepts accessible to a broader audience. Some of her most well-received works include: *Jaibo Rasayanik Bikash Aru Jibar Utpatti*, an insightful book on biochemical evolution and the origin of life, and *Bangsagati Aru Iyar Rasayan*, another comprehensive discussion on heredity and its chemical foundations. Both were written in Assamese language, her mother tongue.

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Arunmoni was also a passionate advocate for women participation in science. She worked tirelessly to encourage Assamese women to engage in scientific pursuits, think rationally, and denounce superstitions. As Head of the Department of Chemistry at Gauhati University in 1979, she played a key role in inviting Nobel Laureate Dorothy Hodgkin to deliver a lecture on 'Atomic Structure of Crystals'. By purposefully choosing a female scientist of such high stature, Arunmoni aimed to inspire young women and challenge societal norms, demonstrating that with the right mindset and determination, women could excel in fields traditionally dominated by men.

In addition to her books, Arunmoni contributed a large number of science articles to different newspapers andto the *Bijnan Jeuti*, the newsletter of the Assam Science Society. Among her notable writings was an article on Leonardo da Vinci's scientific contributions, where she highlighted his early understanding of fossils and his realization—more than a century before Galileo, that the Sun, not the Earth, is at the center of the Solar System, with planets moving in elliptical orbits. She also wrote an engaging and informative article on the Periodic Table and its creator, Mendeleev, uncovering many fascinating details.Furthermore, she authored twenty small booklets on various scientific topics, further cementing her legacy as a dedicated educator and science communicator.

This highlights Arunmoni's deep dedication to education and her efforts to make scientific knowledge accessible to the public. She worked tirelessly to present complex scientific facts in a way that was easily understandable, ensuring that even those previously shying away from science could develop curiosity and appreciation for the subject. Balancing such a mission with her personal responsibilities was no small feat. With limited resources, she managed the well-being of her family, raised two children, and cared for her equally accomplished husband, all while staying connected with extended family. Her work reflects an unwavering commitment to society and a profound mastery of her subject. It is also worth noting that she played a significant role in mentoring her husband's nephew, who lived with them during his M.Sc. studies. Under her guidance, he later earned a Ph.D. in the United States, became the Head of the Chemistry Department at Dibrugarh University, and eventually served as the Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies in Science and Technology, Govt. of Assam in Sonapur, near Guwahati.

LIST OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN VARIOUS INTERNATIONAL & NATIONAL JOURNALS

Sl No	Name of Paper	Name of Journal, Published Year and Page No.
1	Preparation and Debenzylation of 2:2-dibenzylthioazobenzene	Journal of Chemical Society, 1955, 3798-3804

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2	Preparation & Debenzylation of 2-Benzylthio-2'-and 4'-nitroazobenzene	Journal of Chemical Society, 1956, 90-95
3	Debenzylation of 1-benzylthio-2-phenylazonaphthalene	Journal of Chemical Society, 1956, 96-99
4	Reaction of Axobenzene-2-sulphenyl bromide and its Derivatives with Malonic acid, Acetone & Acetophenone	Journal of Chemical Society, 1956, 648-52
5	Action of alkali on Azobenzene-2-sulphenyl bromide and its derivatives	Journal of Chemical Society, 1956, 653-58
6	Action of alkali on Azobenzene-2-sulphenyl bromide	Journal of Chemical Society, 1965, 51-52
7	The structure of 2'-methyl-4'-nitroazobenzene-2-sulphenyl halides	Journal of Chemical Society, 1969, 1828-1830
8	Action of alkali on 2-methyl-4-nitroazobenzene-2'-sulphenyl bromide	Indian Journal of Chemistry, 1970, Vol 8, 1072-1073
9	Reaction of Azobenzene-2-sulphenyl bromide with Alkyl methyl ketones & phenols	Indian Journal of Chemistry, 1973, Vol 11, 315-317
10	Preparation of 2-p-tolylazo-naphthalene-1-sulphur tribromide and its reaction with alkali	Journal of Assam Science Society, Vol.XVI(No.2), 1973
11	Reactions of 2-arylazoaryl sulphonyl bromide with olefins	Current Science, Vol 47(19), 727-728
12	Action of alkali on 2-p-tolylazonaphthalene-1-sulphenyl bromide	Current Science, Vol 47(19), 731-733

Sent for publication but no definite information about date and issue

1	Reactions of 2-arylazo-naphthalene-1-sulphonyl bromide with carbon acids	Journal of Chemistry Society
2	Synthesis of 4-methylazobenzene-2-sulphenyl compounds & determination of their structures by electronic absorption spectra	
3	Action of alkali on 4-methylazobenzene-2-sulphenyl bromide	Indian Journal of Chemistry

CONCLUSION:

Throughout history, women have had to overcome multi-pronged barriers to get access to higher education leave aside the scope to contribute after achieving the same. The role of women was confined to the kitchen

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and other household chores in addition to bearing and rearing children. At a time when academic spaces were generally male-dominated, the efforts of pioneering women not only opened entry for themselves but paved the way for generations to come. While European nations had made significant strides in education and research by the late 19th century—epitomized by figures like Marie Curie, who won Nobel Prizes in Physics (1903) and Chemistry (1911) for her groundbreaking work on radioactivity and the discovery of Radium—Indian women, particularly those in Assam, were still struggling for access to basic educational opportunities. This contrast becomes starkly evident when we consider the hardships faced by Chandraprabha Saikiani, who, around the same time, was compelled to leave school due to societal constraints.While the European countries had long moved forward in the field of education and research in the late nineteenth century, Marie Curie being the glaring example clinching double Nobel in 1903 and 1911 (the first one in Physics for discovering radioactivity and second one in chemistry for discovering Radium), Indian women, especially the Assamese women languished far away from facilities of modern education which we find as we read the plight of Chandraprabha Saikiani who was forced out of school nearly in the same time period. Taking India into context, there had been only a few such women in the field of advanced education like Kamini Roy, first honours graduate in British India, Pandita Ramabai, who took higher education in UK and USA, Anandibai Joshi, the first Indian woman who received a degree in Western (modern) medicine, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, a physician (Madras Medical College) and Dr. Durgabai Desmukh, a founder of the Andhra Mahila Sabha, an institution devoted to women's education and empowerment, etc. In Assam, Arunmoni Chaudhuri became a torch bearer in higher education especially in the field of science and contributed towards all round development for not only Assamese women but the entire student community working shoulder to shoulder with male counterparts in a freshly established university. She automatically turned into an inspiration for many young women who dared to take up higher studies and also science that required more whole-hearted commitment, was comparatively expensive and called for deeper studies including practical classes in a confined laboratory mostly with male classmates that was frowned upon by the puritans. She tried very hard to attract Assamese women to the field of science with great sincerity. It is worth mentioning that the noted scientist and professor A. Burawoy noticed her intelligence in a conversation as she accompanied her husband Dr. Bhumidhar Choudhuy, a research scholar in physics and as an effect of the same Arunmoni was insisted to work in the field of research related to her basic subject in Masters, i.e. Chemistry. It is more interesting to note that Arunmoni completed her Ph.D. programme some six month ahead of her husband though she started late and also, she had conceived and gave birth to her eldest child, a daughter in the intervening period (personal diary, unpublished).

Beyond her contributions to Chemistry and her dedicated efforts to popularize science, Arunmoni Chaudhuri had a profound love for literature. Despite her demanding academic and professional commitments, she never lost the literary talent she had shown in childhood. An avid reader and writer, she authored numerous articles

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in Assamese. She also ventured into translation of rich literary contents, bringing global and regional classics to Assamese readers. Her Assamese translation of Kahlil Gibran's*The Prophet* retained its original title, while Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Chander Pahar* (originally in Bengali meaning hill of moonlight) was assigned to her for translation by Sahitya Akademi and published as *Jonar Pahar*—a work that gained immense popularity, earning her recognition. Her philosophy on teaching is best reflected in an excerpt from her essay in the book *Past Teachers*, (p.92), published by Cotton College, Guwahati, Assam where she started her teaching career:

> "Here, (in Cotton College) for the first time I realized that just acquiring a degree by passing examinations was not enough to be a successful teacher. There is a difference between knowing a subject and imparting knowledge effectively to students. The secret perhaps lies in the experience gained over the years. There is always room for improvement in our lectures. This is what I learned from my seniors—a guiding vision that later helped me in my teaching career."

Apart from academics and literature, Arunmoni had always been a strong advocate for women'sempowerment through science education. She wrote about the third female Nobel Laureate after Marie and Eve Curie-Dorothy Hopkins on learning of her demise emphasising on her simplicity and very ordinary demeanour so that any woman of substance can draw necessary motivation from it and march forward valiantly to achieve ones set goal. She wrote extensively to encourage Assamese women to embrace science, highlighting its impact on daily life. She emphasized that scientific knowledge helps in raising children, planning a nutritious diet, preventing and treating diseases, and even assessing the quality of household products. She believed that a housewife with a scientific mindset could comprehend everything from genetic cloning and space missions to forensic techniques, satellite launches, and even complex subjects like RDX, atomic bombs, and modern warfare. In one of her essays, she stated,

> "So far, I have only mentioned a few practical aspects of the necessity of science in domestic matters. However, any intelligent woman, with effort, can master these practical aspects. Science education helps women grasp them with ease" (*Arunmoni Chaudhurir Rachanawali*, p.97).

Arunmoni's selfless dedication to higher education serves as an inspiration. If her principles and ideals were taught to students, they could shape the next generation and foster an environment of better education.

Despite her remarkable achievements, Arunmoni remained humble and stayed away from media attention. She perfectly balanced her personal and professional life, fulfilling her roles as a wife, mother,

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teacher, and researcher. Like the reagents are arranged in the chemistry laboratory in an orderly manner so that it can be found and picked by anyone, she arranged everything at her home right from the various containers in the kitchen cupboard to the dresses. She remembered everything so vividly that she could specifically say about the exact location of a certain thing and the particular order it was arranged in the shelf and all other details in the surrounding for anyone to find it in a trice. She took care to personally prepare home-cooked sweets and meals for her husband, Dr. Bhumidhar Chaudhuri, a distinguished academician himself to ensure that he keeps good health. It is worth mentioning that Bhumidhar Chaudhuri was the first person to introduce computer education in Gauhati University and was the founder chairman of Assam Higher Secondary Education Council. Their two children also followed distinguished career paths—her daughter, now retired, served as the Head of the Department of Physics at B. Barooah College, Guwahati, while her son, a gerontologist, specializes in elderly healthcare and practices in the United States. However, it is disheartening that despite her immense contributions, Arunmoni Chaudhuri's name was not included in the book featuring fifty leading women from Assam, published by Handique Girls College, a college of repute and more importantly the first women's college of Northeast India established in the year 1939. This speaks volumes about her quiet nature, her lack of interest in self-promotion, and perhaps the indifference of contemporary literary elites towards her legacy. A woman of intellect and a person with a golden heart, she fulfilled every role with grace, though recognition eluded her. Her story highlights how societal gender norms can lead to women being overlooked, even when they excel in every area.

On September 22, 2012, Arunmoni Chaudhuri passed away peacefully at her home near the Chandmari Police Station in Chandmari Colony, Guwahati, Assam. Even in her final moments around noon, she lovingly served lunch to her husband, urged him to eat, and then went to rest, mentioning that she felt slightly drowsy and tired. She quietly and gracefully left this world while lying in her bed. Though she is no longer among us, her remarkable legacy as a scientist, educator, writer, and mentor continues to inspire and guide future generations.

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বশিষ্টামহলিাঃপ্ৰবীণাআৰুনবীনাঃড. অৰুণমণচিৌধুৰী – বীৰনেগগৈ, *সাদিনীয়াপ্রহৰী*, ১৭পুহ, ১৯০৭শক,

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কেইগৰাকীমানবিশিষ্টঅসমীয়াবিজ্ঞানী–

*শিক্ষাব্রতীৰজীৱনকাহিনী,*সংকলকদুৰ্লভচন্দ্ৰমহন্ত,অসমপৰৰিশেবদ্যিাভৱন, চপ্েতম্বেৰ, ২০১২

INTERVIEWS WITH:

1. Late Dr. Bhumidhar Choudhury (Husband)- retired Professor and Head, Department of Physics, Gauhati University and founder Chairman, Assam Higher Secondary Education Council – an eminent scientist (2015)
2. Dr. Jayashree Dutta (Daughter), retired, Head, Department of Physics, B. Barooah College, Guwahati (2015 & 2025)
3. Late Dr. Narendra Nath Dass (Nephew)-retired Professor and Head, Department of Chemistry, Dibrugarh University, former Director, Institute of Advanced Studies in Science and Technology (IASST), Guwahati-an eminent scientist (2015)

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