Social Media and New Information Dynamics in Political Campaigning

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Today the political information environment produced during the course of an electoral campaign is considerably more complex than a generation or more ago. In a broadcast era of politics, communication environment consisted of flows between campaigns and the public, or within the public often responding to and engaging both campaign and media communications. Campaign periods involved an increase in the volume of communications from campaigns and parties resulting in greater stability in mass level belief structures (Converse 1962). Today politicians treat Twitter as a virtual representation of the public sphere in which the campaign is fought in the broadest sense, engaging citizens, organized interests, and media outlets in a battle of ideas (Kreiss 2014). For Downs (1957), information is a critical quantity as the costs associated with its acquisition and processing are a significant impediment to participation and effective participation. However, in an informational era of politics, the costs of accessing information have declined substantially even if information processing costs persist. Apart from the reduced costs of information acquisition, the structure of the political communication environment has changed substantially. The monological flow of communications between parties and publics is now a dialogical flow with low cost means of communicating through email and social media channels. Form many politically interested and motivated persons, the information processing costs are more a matter of lifestyle choices than a collective action problem to be overcome (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). This paper looks at the extent to which political campaigns, particularly the front-runners, structure the flows of communications about the election.

Political Communications and the Information Age

Today we are said to live in an information society. The diffusion and integration of digital networked devices into everyday life enables ubiquitous communication rendering the experience of everyday life an encounter and interaction with digital objects (Castells 2009; Jensen, Jorba, and Anduiza 2012). Political organization is said to be increasingly professionalized meaning that formal political organizations increasingly turn to highly specialized information processing roles and centralized communications (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Castells 2009, 204–216; Lilleker and Negrine 2002). However the growth of digital communications in political organization can also be a disruptive force. The growth of communications beyond the broadcast era of politics is estimated to produce a doubling of information every two years (Keane 2013, pt. (Kindle) 89). With the expansion of social media use, campaigns now face an increasingly complicated communication environment involving not only the increasing number of broadcast media outlets but also a proliferation of bloggers and social media users who may not only be influential online, they are often opinion leaders offline (Norris and Curtice 2008).

Politics in information society is not just about the sheer abundance of political information but a transformation in the organization and operation of political life. Information in information society is no longer an instrumental quantity transmitted from one place to another. It is produced and circulated as a central activity of political life, coordinating the flow of events and activities as a series of political inputs, throughputs, and feedback from various parts of a political system (Corning 1983, 206–207; Crozier 2012; Easton 1965). Political organization occurs within and through communication such that the capacity to exercise power “centers on capacities to coordinate and cultivate information flows” (Crozier 2010, 508). Formal political organizations, institutions, unorganized publics, crowds and so forth all are increasingly using a variety of digital media platforms to carry out organizing functions which transforms the nature of political life. Most importantly, it creates new capacities outside of formal bureaucratic organizations to organize information flows steering the operation of the political system (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber 2003).
Politics in information society is not just about the sheer abundance of political information but a transformation in the organization and operation of political life. Information in information society is not only or primarily an instrumental quantity transmitted from one place to another. It is produced and circulated as a central activity of political life, coordinating the flow of events and activities as a series of political inputs, throughputs, and feedback from various parts of a political system (Corning 1983, 206–207; Crozier 2012; Easton 1965b). Luhmann (1995, 67) defines information as “an event that selects system states” by which he means, information has a limited temporal existence which updates any particular state of a system. While information retains meaning through repetition, it loses its informational value as the subsequent communications – and this includes decisions and actions which are meaningful – which that information gives rise are only implicated in the first instance. The transition from industrial to information society represents a shift in the organization of political life shifting sites of political contestation to new problematics. Lash (2002) notes that the metanarratives which organized society around various ideological confrontations against relations of exploitation, have given way to a society organized around the production and circulation of information. Information society compresses meaning to small bits which move too quickly for grand metanarratives. Political life is not just characterized by an abundance of information, these changes represent an informational logic which is coming to permeate politics.

Campaigning in an Era of Declining Party Identification

Party identification has been in decline across the economically developed democracies. Party members have historically served as a key resource to carry out mobilization but party membership and party identification across most industrialized democracies have been declining in recent decades (Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Dalton 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Underlying these changes are the erosion of traditional cleavage systems growing complexity in political systems, which undermines the traditional cleavage structure as a mobilization base (Swanson and Mancini 1996), and widespread shifts in value preferences which challenge hierarchical authority rooted in tradition and institutions (Dalton 2007; Inglehart 1997). In contrast to the organic ties of cleavage identities which integrated social and political life within civil society, new forms of political community are emerging. There is evidence of this in movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados which resist organic identities such as class just as they reject efforts at co-optation by formal political organizations such as unions and parties (Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker 2014; Jensen and Bang 2013).

With so many alternatives to formal membership in formal political organizations, parties find themselves in a very competitive market for attention. Today, political organization occurs within and through communication such that the capacity to exercise power “centers on capacities to coordinate and cultivate information flows” (Crozier 2010, 508). Formal political organizations, institutions, unorganized publics, crowds and so forth all are increasingly using a variety of digital media platforms to carry out organizing functions which transforms the nature of political life. Most importantly, it creates new capacities outside of formal bureaucratic organizations to organize information flows steering the operation of the political system (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber 2003). These new forms of organization enact political communities which operate as part of a political system rather than agitating from the outside on the premise that they do not need formal representatives, they represent themselves (Jensen and Bang 2013; Tormey 2015).

Political information has generally been treated as an inert object transmitted from one location to another. This fit the broadcast model of politics where studies of campaign effects and media effects reigned as the critical issues. Though the two-step flow model of political communications was presented as a challenge to the direct effects of campaigns and media communications, a monological relationship between campaigns and audiences remained (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and
McPhee 1986; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1970; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). The main theoretical competition with the two-step flow model of political communication and opinion formation is the direct effects school exemplified in the work of Converse and his colleagues (Campbell et al. 1980; Converse 1962), and later Zaller (1992). Zaller develops a model of public opinion formation linking the receipt of communication flows to one’s acceptance and subsequent sampling in subject's future communications about politics. To the extent the direct effects model holds, social media may be important conduits as they circumvent the selectivity and framing of media outlets, directly communicating with members of the public. This is not to say that members of the public and journalists do not engage in feedback within this medium (Couldry 2008; Norris and Curtice 2008), however such feedback may well be represented in higher levels of communications about campaigns. For Downs (1957), though persons were not only consumers of political information and sometimes lobbied political authorities, this was a particularly rare and high threshold political activity. Social media communications are typically low threshold political acts, often maligned as a substitute for political action (Morozov 2009; Reardon 2013; Waugh et al. 2013). Large volumes of low threshold activities, however, can sometimes aggregate to form significant sources of meaning constitution within the space of a political campaign (Chadwick 2012). Embarrassing moments (Karpf 2012; Keane 2013, sec. Kindle: 749–762) can be quickly tweeted and retweeted just as politicians may use the space to craft their images; hashtags can be hijacked, and issues introduced and debated. The online public sphere is as varied as the offline world of politics in which it is embedded.

Political parties and campaigns have therefore turned to social media as a means to compete in these highly dynamic communication spaces. Communicative interventions by campaigns would ideally have some impacts on the overall shape of the communications about the election occurring within social media spaces. If we consider the communication operations available to campaigns and others using Twitter, Twitter users can retweet – i.e. forward – messages, they can reply to messages, they can mention others without directly replying, and they can talk more generally about the parties and candidates without mentioning them. Obtaining retweets, replies, and mentions are key marketing metrics in using the technology as they signify that a particular brand has received greater attention (Zarrella 2009). Whether or not tweeting signals electoral performance is another matter in need of theoretical development (Jensen and Anstead 2013; Jungherr 2015). Political campaigns see these interventions as effective and invest substantial resources in their operation (Kreiss 2014). Whether or not campaign communication flows, replies, and retweeting impact the wider production of tweets remains an open empirical question. This paper examines whether campaign tweeting impacts the overall flows of communications about the campaign and interactions with the campaign.

Based on the types of communications operations available to Twitter users we ask the following research questions as to whether campaign tweets have any effect on subsequent tweeting in relation to the campaigns:

1. Do high periods of tweeting by campaigns correspond to high periods of tweeting by the public more generally?

2. Do more campaign tweets give rise to more mentions?

3. Do more campaign tweets give rise to higher levels of retweeting?

4. Are there differences in the way campaigns and publics conduct campaign communications on Twitter between established and industrialized countries and developing countries?
Data and Methods

We evaluate the extent to which political campaigns organize campaign communications in the context of the 2015 UK General Election and the 2014 Lok Sabha Indian elections. These countries have similar political institutions with a lower house elected through plurality districts. The lower house forms the seat of government in both cases. This research design provides a contrast in levels of social media domestication (Brown and Venkatesh 2005; van Deursen and van Dijk 2010; Jensen, Jorba, and Anduiza 2012) where the UK represents a higher percentage of Twitter uptake amongst the population compared to India. It also differentiates the cases in terms of democratic development and political campaign experience. The UK has the oldest progression of democratic political reforms dating back to the Magna Carta while India is the world’s largest democracy, but began that path following independence from the UK in 1947.

The 2014 Indian election and the 2015 UK general election both saw a significant uptake in the use of social media by political campaigns. Narendra Modi emerged as the leader of a BJP party looking to reorient itself from a Hindu-nationalist party to one organized around an economic cleavage. Modi fashioned himself as an economic modernizer with an emphasis on technological development within government as well as his campaign (Chakravartty and Roy 2015). Modi emphasized Western campaign techniques which emphasize presidentialism in rebranding the party in his own image (Bhatt 2014; Kaur 2015). Modi cast himself as an economic modernizer and sought to reorient the party away from Hindu nationalism and more towards economic modernization. By contrast, the incumbent Indian National Congress (INC) did not emphasize the online identity of Rahul Gandhi, their leader. The election was a rout for the INC. The election sets up a comparison between high and low levels of presidentialism in parliamentary campaigning.

The 2015 UK general election involved a high level of social media campaigning. In 2010, social media mattered most to resource poor parties and candidates in the UK (Gibson 2015). From the 2010 election, the campaigns of the major parties substantially increased their use of social media and Twitter in particular (Jensen and Anstead 2014). Whereas the 2014 Lok Sabha election represented a revolution in the use of social media communications, the 2015 UK election represents a maturation of social media use in political campaigning by the major parties. There are 22.7 million Twitter users in India representing 17 percent of the population (The Hindu 2015) compared with 21.1% of British citizens (Dredge 2014). While there is not a great disparity in the percentage of Twitter users between the UK and India, its concentration in the hands of young, middle and upper class segments in India significantly differentiates the population segments which might be reachable via this platform (Grewal 2015). Furthermore, Indian social media users are known to be quite politically engaged with 45% using these platforms to comment on political phenomena (Rajput 2014, 63).

The window of data collection in the UK election spans 31 March 2015, the day after the dissolution of Parliament until 7 May 2015, election day. There were 6,929,537 collected from the Twitter streaming API including the hashtags, “GE2015,” “UKGE2015” and the names and Twitter handles of each of the main parties and party leaders contesting the election. In addition, 22,397 tweets were collected from the parties and their leaders. These accounts included parties and party leaders competing on a national level from the British National Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party, and the Green Party in addition to major regional parties, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Northern Ireland parties were excluded as they account for very few seats in parliament and Sinn Fein has a standing policy to not take their seats which changes the electoral dynamics.

In India, given resource limitations, elections are held over a five week period stretching from 7 April until 12 May, 2014. Results on each regional vote are not released until the voting is completed for all regions. Data collection in the India case spans the first day of voting through May 12, inclusive. The data from the streaming API for the Indian case included references to the main parties, party leaders, and the Twitter screen names from verified accounts for the major
parties and their leaders. The streaming database includes 3,914,090 tweets while the Indian leaders' composed 10,782 tweets between the 15 verified Twitter accounts for candidates and parties contesting the election. These included Narendra Modi's account, the BJP's main account, the Indian National Congress account, but not Rahul Gandhi, its leader who was not active on Twitter at the time, the Aam Aadami Party (AAP) and its leader Arvind Kejriwal, as well as several other candidates and smaller, predominantly regional parties. The BJP and INC have historically been the two major parties and leaders of competing governing blocks. The AAP is a new party recently which emerged from a very popular anti-corruption movement. Though it competed on a wider scale, its support is mostly limited to New Delhi.

Tweets from the streaming API contain a combination of tweets from the campaigns, media outlets, organized interests, citizens, and so forth up to 1% of the total volume on Twitter at any given time. We make no effort to remove these tweets for practical reasons as the identities of individual Twitter accounts are often ambiguous and despite one's professional role in any of the above capacities, they may also tweet on a personal basis. Our underlying assumption is, however that in dealing with very large volumes of tweets, those tweeting in a professional capacity captured by the streaming API constitute a small segment of the overall tweets. Furthermore, as these accounts participate in the production and flow of information within the context of a political campaign, there are theoretical grounds for their inclusion.

We differentiate tweet posts in terms of monological posts and replies. These signify different ways of being engaged with the tweeting public. Campaign tweets constitute interventions in the space of communications introducing or responding to topics. Whatever their aim and style of presentation, tweets involve propositional content. Responses likewise contain propositional content but they also enact a dialogical relationship which itself may be generative of more communications, inviting successive responses in the course of a conversation: communication begets communication (Crozier 2010). Replies were operationalized per the parsing of the metadata by Twitter: if a tweet is a reply, there is information about both the user and the tweet ID replied to. Since tweet ID's are not stable over time, replies were operationalized by the presence of a screen name replied to. Retweets were operationalized as the average number of retweets per campaign account and mentions are operationalized as tweets that are not replies nor retweets but contain a screen name. Last, tweets about a campaign were operationalized with respect to the presence of the candidate's surname, the full name run together, and common variations of mentions of a party. These were parsed using the untokenized strings of tweets so as to differentiate the uses of these terms from their use in Twitter handles.

In analyzing relationships between campaign behavior and that of the wider public, it is difficult to infer the causal relationships. The reason is that it is unclear what temporal windows to apply over a large dataset to analyze cause and effect relationships. Sometimes the majority of a reaction to a tweet falls within the span of an hour, sometimes over the course of a day as it enters the news cycle. Given the variance in what can be expected, we analyze campaign tweets and the wider reaction across Twitter, segmented on a daily basis as that affords both time for the tweet to have direct effects as well as participate in news media cycles. By consequence, however, we are unable to infer whether a tweet is a reaction to topics produced by the campaign or reactions more broadly within the general public. Likewise, we are unable to infer the prevailing direction of causality between campaign tweets and tweets produced by members of the public and other organizations. It may indeed be the case that sometimes campaigns are reactive and sometimes proactive.

**Results**

If political communications are primarily elite driven, then the patterns of tweeting in elections should be influenced by campaign tweets. For this reason we start with the distribution of tweeting by campaigns accounts in each of the elections. The most successful campaigns do not necessarily
tweet more; tweet production and seats won appear to be uncorrelated. Figures 1a and 1b indicate that the most active campaigns on social media tend to be parties which were otherwise quite marginal in the electoral success. In both the UK and Indian general elections the parties which tweeted the most, the Liberal Democrats in the UK and the AAP in India, saw substantial seat losses in the case of the former, and a failure to build on its success in the Dehlhi regional elections in the case of the latter. Both had unexpectedly poor electoral showings. In general campaigns these campaigns rarely reply, and in particular they rarely reply to ordinary citizens. They often reply to media authorities or other campaigns. 37 of Ed Miliband’s 40 replies were to himself as a means to link tweets together beyond the 140 character limit.

Whether campaigns drive tweeting more generally or the communication flows within tweets gives rise to tweeting from campaigns, we cannot resolve here. However, to the extent a relationship obtains in either direction we should detect a correlation between tweeting by campaigns and tweeting more generally about the campaign. Here we consider the main parties in the UK and their leaders (Labour, Conservative, Ed Miliband, and David Cameron) and likewise in India. The main UK campaigns ranged from 51 to 824 tweets per day; Indian campaign tweeting ranged from 93 to 4,721. The number of tweets produced within the UK Twitter stream ranged from 13,494 to 1,068,434 and 45,345 to 162,120. Much of the difference in the total number of tweets collected from the Twitter stream stems from the significant numbers of tweets produced on election day whereas the distributed elections in India give rise to a lower level of variance. To determine whether tweeting by the campaigns is influenced by tweeting more generally, or the other way around, we find the correlation coefficient between campaign tweeting and tweets produced about or in relation to the campaign. In neither case is there a statistically significant result. In the UK case, there is a -0.300 Pearson r (p=0.085) and in India r = -0.103 (p=0.549).

We asked two research questions concerning the relationship between campaign tweeting and responses within the Twitter stream at an aggregate level for the campaign. These concerned whether greater levels of campaign activity on Twitter give rise to greater levels of communication about the campaign. We consider this with respect to the relationship between campaign tweeting and replies with tweets in the streaming API which mention the campaign and tweets which talk about the campaign. The relationship between discussion of campaigns and campaign tweeting in the UK and India are presented in Figures 2a and 2b, respectively. The results show there is a weak relationship between campaign tweeting and tweeting about campaigns more generally in the UK. The Liberal Democrats were among the most active on Twitter and had a fairly large level of tweet commentary despite or because of their poor electoral showing. The correlation between campaign tweeting and discussion about the campaign on Twitter is 0.564 (p=0.045). To provide comparability, with the UK case we look at the main parties and candidates contesting seats in the Indian election. Unlike smaller parties and individual candidates, these campaigns are better resourced with more access to communications advisors. Yet they are not successful in translating their tweets into increasing discussion on Twitter about their party. In contrast to the UK case, the level of campaign tweeting appears unrelated to the level of discussion about the campaigns. The Pearson r correlation between campaign tweeting and commentary about the campaign on Twitter is -0.103 (p=0.549).  

In addition, we consider the relationship between tweet mentions. We earlier surmised that more communications from campaigns would increase the volume of communications which might

1Curiously, this is exactly the same correlation and p-value as we found in the relationship between daily campaign tweeting and those produced by the campaign.
be replied to. Parties were mentioned more often than party leaders with the exception of David Cameron, the incumbent PM. Political parties were substantially more active on Twitter in both the UK and India. Our data are presented in Figures 3a and 3b, representing the UK and India respectively. While there is no statistically significant correlation between campaign tweets and mentions on Twitter in the UK (r=0.170, p=0.578), the relationship is negative and statistically significant in the case of India (r=0.880, p=0.049). In India, the AAP was an outlier with far more tweets (3,185) than any other party or party leader yet they received only 196 mentions during the course of the campaign. Meanwhile, their leader, Arvind Kejriwal, who produced a paltry 220 tweets during the campaign, had 831,875 mentions. The Labour party led all UK mentions with 368,754 followed by David Cameron and UKIP in a distant third.

Last, we consider the relationship between retweeting and campaign posts on Twitter. Party leaders in both cases had substantially more retweets than the parties themselves. In India, the BJP averaged 9.09 retweets per tweet compared to their leader, Narendra Modi’s 700.21. Arvind Kejriwal led all campaign accounts with 945.53 retweets while Ed Miliband’s 656.70 set the pace for the mean number of retweets in the UK, followed by Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party’s 499.47. These data are presented in Figures 4a and 4b. The Pearson r correlation between tweeting and retweets in the UK is -0.458 (p=0.086) and -0.775 (p=0.123).

The preponderance of null findings between campaign tweets and aspects of tweeting about the campaign are found in both the UK and India. However, at least at an aggregate level, there appears to be a closer relationship between campaign tweeting and tweeting in the wider public in the UK compared to India in two respects. First, there is a weak correlation between campaign tweeting and tweeting about the campaign in the UK. Second, we see in the Indian case that those accounts which are most active are least mentioned. This suggests that the relation between communication productivity and activity is not well-coupled in the Indian case.

Discussion

There appears to be limited connections between campaign tweeting and the flow of tweets in Twitter’s stream. This finding rounds counter to prevailing accounts of the role of political information in public opinion formation. Although these data cannot shed light on the direction of causality, the null findings of correlations between campaign communication flows and various forms of engagement by others would countenance claims of causal connections between campaign tweeting and resulting changes in the flow of communications about the campaign. Furthermore, against the limited evidence of coupling between campaign tweets and tweets from the wider public, these correlations, though mostly insignificant, have negative signs suggesting that if we had more cases, we would not expect to find a positive correlation between campaign interventions on Twitter and aspects of tweeting by publics.

RQ1 asked whether campaign tweets and tweets about the campaign from the Twitter stream correlated over time. Our results indicated that in neither the Indian case nor in the UK were tweets from the campaigns and the general public correlated over time when aggregated at the level of a
day. Thus result is surprising as minimally debates attract a significant amount of attention on social media platforms and campaigns are often engaged in this space simultaneously. Though we are dealing with relatively few cases in both campaigns, it is unlikely if we included more campaigns or extended the time as the correlation coefficients are negative. This finding suggests that campaigns and publics are more selective and independently acting in campaign communication spaces rather than reacting to each other.

The second research question concerned whether more tweeting led to more mentions on Twitter. We found mixed evidence for that. In the UK there was a slight correlation between campaign tweets and the overall volume of mentions on Twitter. When analyzed over time, campaign by campaign there was no evidence of this relationship which suggests it might be spurious. In India, there is no statistically significant correlation in as very local phenomena – the high level of tweeting by a minor party which was built around the image of its leader while the leader received a very high level of retweets despite the comparably low rate of tweeting.

RQ3 asked whether campaigns more active on Twitter produced more retweets. This question empirically investigates the claim that communications beget communications. The evidence we find indicates otherwise. The correlation coefficients are both statistically insignificant and negative. Finally we inquired as to whether campaigns were more successful in impacting tweet patterns in the UK than in India due to greater consolidation in campaigning practices. Here we find some evidence consistent with UK campaigns on the whole being slightly more likely to translate their tweeting into greater attention of the campaign and at the same evidence that some accounts produce a very high volume of tweets in India but are not at all gaining traction with the wider public. UK These data are not borne out on a day-by-day basis suggesting that this correlation may be spurious. Second, the relationship between campaign tweeting and mentions about the campaigns is strongly negative in the case of India. In part this is driven by the AAP and its leader, the former quite active in tweeting and the latter frequently mentioned by a group of active supporters.

The research presented here focused predominantly on the contributions of the major parties in the recent Indian and British elections and found limited capacity of those campaigns to remain the focus of attention in communications about the election. In Luhmann's sense, they fail to structure successive system states, though parties are more engaged than their leaders in these efforts. In terms of the public opinion literature, Zaller's work would suggest that campaign communications which are more available are more likely to be sampled which we did not see here. While the number of Twitter followers an account has impacts the probability of reception, we concentrated here on the largest parties and their leaders – the same accounts which have some of the largest followings. These findings suggest that the use of Twitter and other social media in political campaigns may still primarily benefit those campaigns which are resource poor. Similarly, it may be the case that supporters of campaigns which receive less attention through broadcast channels are therefore more engaged online. To substantiate that claim, future work is necessary to compare major parties and minor parties with respect to their activity and that of their supporters.
Figure 1a: Distribution of UK Campaign Tweets

Campaign Account

Number of Posts

Type
Kopios
Tweets
Figure 2a: Relationship Between Campaign Tweeting and Public Engagement in the UK

Campaign
- brep
- Conservatives
- David_Cameron
- Ed_Miliband
- Leanne_Wood
- LibDems
- natalieben
- nick_clegg
- NicolaSturgeon
- Nigel_Farage
- Plaid_Cymru
- TheGreenParty
- theSNP
- UKIP
- UKLabour
Figure 2b: Relationship Between Campaign Tweeting and Public Engagement in India

Campaign Tweets vs Tweets About Each Campaign

Campaigns:
- "AamAadmi Party"
- "ArvindKejriwal"
- "BJPIndia"
- "INCIndia"
- "narendramodi"
Figure 3a: Campaign Tweeting and Campaign Mentions in the UK
Figure 3b: Campaign Tweeting and Campaign Mentions in India
Figure 4a: Mean Retweets by Campaign in UK
Figure 4b: Mean Retweets by Campaign in India

Campaign Account

- AAP
- Aam Aadmi Party
- Arnab Goswami
- R. P. Hindu
- INC
- nonmod

Campaign

- AAP
- Aam Aadmi Party
- Arnab Goswami
- R. P. Hindu
- INC
- nonmod


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