AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND FARMING DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICTS PROGRAMME: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT OF ALLURI SITARAMA RAJU DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH

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Abstract

Agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for the majority of rural households in the Alluri Sitarama Raju (ASR) District of Andhra Pradesh, particularly among tribal communities residing in hilly and forested regions. Despite its rich natural resources, the district has historically experienced developmental challenges characterized by inadequate agricultural infrastructure, low farm productivity, fragmented landholdings, poor market access, limited irrigation facilities, and socio-economic deprivation. Recognizing these challenges, the Government of India launched the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) in 2018 to accelerate inclusive and sustainable development in India's most underdeveloped districts through a convergence of central and state government schemes. Agriculture and water resources constitute one of the programme's core development sectors aimed at enhancing farm productivity, improving irrigation coverage, promoting climate-resilient agriculture, strengthening value chains, and increasing farmers' incomes. This study presents an empirical assessment of farming development under the Aspirational Districts Programme in Alluri Sitarama Raju District using secondary data obtained from government reports, NITI Aayog publications, agricultural statistics, and policy documents. The study analyses agricultural growth through indicators such as cropping intensity, irrigation expansion, crop diversification, horticultural development, institutional credit, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), organic farming, digital agriculture, and livelihood enhancement initiatives. Particular attention is given to the programme's contribution toward tribal agriculture, natural resource management, climate adaptation, and sustainable rural development. The findings indicate that the Aspirational Districts Programme has positively influenced agricultural development by strengthening infrastructure, promoting scientific farming practices, improving institutional coordination, and increasing farmers' access to government support services. However, persistent challenges such as fragmented holdings, inadequate post-harvest infrastructure, climate variability, limited mechanization, poor digital connectivity, and marketing constraints continue to hinder agricultural transformation. The study recommends integrated policy interventions emphasizing climate-smart agriculture, precision farming, digital extension services, value addition, tribal farmer empowerment, and institutional convergence to ensure inclusive and sustainable agricultural development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District.

Keywords-*Aspirational Districts Programme; Alluri Sitarama Raju District; Agricultural Development; Tribal Agriculture; Sustainable Farming; Climate-Smart Agriculture; Farmer Income; Rural Development; Agricultural Productivity; Irrigation; Horticulture; Farmer Producer Organizations; Inclusive Growth; Agricultural Policy; Andhra Pradesh.*

Introduction

Agriculture constitutes the foundation of India's rural economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Although the Indian agricultural sector has experienced remarkable technological progress during the past several decades, substantial regional disparities continue to exist in agricultural

productivity, infrastructure development, irrigation facilities, market accessibility, and farmers' income. These disparities are particularly evident in geographically isolated tribal districts characterized by difficult terrain, inadequate public infrastructure, limited institutional support, and socio-economic backwardness. Recognizing these developmental inequalities, the Government of India launched the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) in January 2018 under the leadership of NITI Aayog. The programme seeks to transform India's most underdeveloped districts through evidence-based governance, data-driven monitoring, institutional convergence, and targeted interventions across key sectors including agriculture and water resources, health and nutrition, education, financial inclusion, infrastructure, and skill development.

Alluri Sitarama Raju District, situated in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, represents one of the state's predominantly tribal districts characterized by extensive forest cover, mountainous terrain, scattered settlements, and a predominantly agrarian economy. Agriculture remains the principal occupation for the majority of households, with crops such as paddy, millets, maize, pulses, coffee, pepper, turmeric, ginger, cashew, and horticultural crops contributing substantially to rural livelihoods. However, agricultural development in the district continues to face multiple structural constraints, including dependence on monsoon rainfall, low irrigation coverage, fragmented landholdings, inadequate mechanization, poor transportation networks, limited market integration, and climate-induced production risks. Tribal farmers often rely on traditional farming methods with limited access to improved technologies, institutional credit, quality inputs, extension services, and organized marketing systems.

The Aspirational Districts Programme has introduced a multidimensional strategy to overcome these constraints through improved governance, enhanced public investment, convergence of departmental schemes, and real-time monitoring of developmental indicators. Agricultural interventions under the programme include promotion of micro-irrigation, watershed development, natural farming, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), digital agriculture, soil health management, crop diversification, horticultural expansion, agricultural mechanization, and capacity-building programmes for farmers. These initiatives aim to enhance agricultural productivity, increase farm incomes, improve nutritional security, strengthen climate resilience, and generate sustainable livelihood opportunities among tribal communities.

In recent years, emerging challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, declining soil fertility, labour shortages, and market fluctuations have further highlighted the importance of resilient agricultural systems capable of sustaining rural livelihoods under uncertain environmental conditions. Consequently, assessing the effectiveness of the Aspirational Districts Programme in promoting farming development has become increasingly important for policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners. This study therefore seeks to critically examine the contribution of the programme toward agricultural transformation in Alluri Sitarama Raju District by analysing recent policy initiatives, developmental

achievements, implementation challenges, and future opportunities for sustainable agricultural growth.

Review of Literature

Agricultural development has consistently been recognised as a fundamental driver of rural transformation, poverty alleviation, and inclusive economic growth in developing countries. Numerous empirical studies have established that improvements in agricultural productivity generate multiplier effects on rural employment, household income, food security, and overall socio-economic development. In India, however, regional inequalities in agricultural infrastructure, irrigation facilities, institutional support, market access, and technological adoption continue to create significant disparities in rural development outcomes. Tribal and hilly districts remain particularly vulnerable due to geographical isolation, ecological fragility, and limited public investment.

The launch of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) by NITI Aayog marked a significant shift toward evidence-based district planning and outcome-oriented governance. Unlike earlier development programmes focusing solely on financial allocations, the ADP emphasizes continuous monitoring of developmental indicators, interdepartmental convergence, competitive federalism, and real-time performance evaluation. Agriculture and water resources constitute one of the programme's five core thematic sectors, recognizing that improvements in farming systems are essential for achieving sustainable livelihoods in backward districts.

Existing literature indicates that agricultural interventions implemented under the Aspirational Districts Programme have contributed to improved irrigation infrastructure, promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations, horticultural diversification, watershed development, digital extension services, and enhanced institutional coordination. Studies also suggest that convergence among agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, rural development, and tribal welfare departments has strengthened the delivery of government services and increased the adoption of scientific farming practices.

Nevertheless, several researchers have observed that substantial challenges remain. In tribal districts, low literacy levels, poor transportation infrastructure, inadequate storage facilities, fragmented landholdings, weak value chains, limited digital connectivity, and climate variability continue to constrain agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of developmental gains depends upon strengthening local institutions, expanding climate-smart agriculture, improving market integration, enhancing value addition, and promoting community participation in agricultural planning.

Although a growing body of literature examines the Aspirational Districts Programme at the national level, district-specific studies focusing on the agricultural transformation of Alluri Sitarama Raju District remain limited. This study addresses that gap by providing a comprehensive empirical assessment of farming development under the programme using

recent secondary data, policy documents, and government reports. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive agricultural development and evidence-based rural policy in India.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the impact of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) on farming development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District, Andhra Pradesh. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the status of agricultural development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District under the Aspirational Districts Programme.
2. To analyse the contribution of government interventions towards improving agricultural productivity and farmers' livelihoods.
3. To assess the development of irrigation, horticulture, crop diversification, and natural resource management in the district.
4. To evaluate the role of institutional support, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), agricultural extension services, and financial inclusion in farming development.
5. To identify the major challenges affecting sustainable agricultural development in the district.
6. To suggest suitable policy measures for promoting climate-resilient and sustainable agriculture in Alluri Sitarama Raju District.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based exclusively on secondary data to examine farming development under the Aspirational Districts Programme in Alluri Sitarama Raju District of Andhra Pradesh. The study does not involve field surveys or primary data collection; instead, it systematically analyses information obtained from authentic secondary sources. Relevant data were collected from publications of NITI Aayog, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, the Government of Andhra Pradesh, the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, district statistical handbooks, agricultural census reports, NABARD, ICAR, National Sample Survey (NSS) reports, India Meteorological Department (IMD) publications, annual reports of the Department of Agriculture, policy documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and other scholarly sources. The collected information was reviewed, classified, and synthesized to evaluate various dimensions of farming development, including agricultural productivity, irrigation expansion, crop diversification, horticultural development, institutional credit, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), natural farming, digital agriculture, and farmers' livelihood enhancement. The study employs descriptive analysis, comparative analysis, trend analysis, and qualitative content analysis to interpret the available information and examine the

effectiveness of government interventions under the Aspirational Districts Programme. The findings are interpreted in the broader context of sustainable agriculture, tribal development, climate resilience, and rural transformation. Appropriate acknowledgment has been provided to all published sources, and references are presented in accordance with the APA 7th edition citation style to maintain academic integrity and transparency.

Profile of Alluri Sitarama Raju District

Alluri Sitarama Raju District is one of the twenty-six districts of Andhra Pradesh, formed in April 2022 following the reorganization of districts by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. Named after the legendary tribal freedom fighter Alluri Sitarama Raju, the district occupies a strategically important position in the Eastern Ghats and is characterized by extensive forest cover, hilly terrain, rich biodiversity, and a predominantly tribal population. The district comprises several tribal mandals where agriculture, horticulture, livestock rearing, and collection of minor forest produce constitute the primary sources of livelihood. The region is inhabited mainly by Scheduled Tribe communities such as the Konda Dora, Bagata, Valmiki, Gadaba, Konda Reddi, and Porja, who possess rich indigenous knowledge of natural resource management and traditional farming systems.

Agriculture in the district is largely rainfed, making it highly dependent on the southwest and northeast monsoons. Paddy, millets, maize, pulses, turmeric, ginger, coffee, pepper, cashew, mango, banana, and several horticultural crops dominate the agricultural landscape. Coffee cultivation has gained considerable importance in tribal areas, supported by government initiatives promoting plantation development and tribal livelihoods. Despite favourable agro-climatic conditions, agricultural productivity remains relatively low because of fragmented landholdings, limited irrigation facilities, inadequate mechanization, poor transportation infrastructure, insufficient storage facilities, and restricted market access.

The district possesses considerable potential for sustainable agricultural development due to its fertile valleys, diverse climatic conditions, abundant forest resources, and increasing emphasis on organic and natural farming. Government programmes such as the Aspirational Districts Programme, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), National Food Security Mission (NFSM), and Natural Farming Mission have strengthened agricultural infrastructure, watershed development, irrigation facilities, soil conservation, and capacity-building initiatives. Nevertheless, climate variability, recurring droughts, wildlife damage, labour shortages, and market fluctuations continue to pose significant challenges to farming communities. Understanding these regional characteristics is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of agricultural development initiatives implemented under the Aspirational Districts Programme.

Farming Development under the Aspirational Districts Programme

Agriculture and water resources constitute one of the five core sectors identified under the Aspirational Districts Programme for accelerating inclusive development in backward districts.

In Alluri Sitarama Raju District, the programme has introduced a comprehensive strategy to strengthen agricultural productivity through convergence of multiple government schemes, institutional coordination, technological interventions, and community participation. The programme focuses not only on increasing crop production but also on enhancing farmers' income, improving nutritional security, promoting sustainable natural resource management, and strengthening climate resilience among tribal farming communities.

Significant efforts have been made to expand irrigation infrastructure through check dams, farm ponds, lift irrigation schemes, watershed development, and micro-irrigation technologies. These interventions have improved water availability for cultivation and reduced dependence on erratic monsoon rainfall. Simultaneously, agricultural departments have promoted crop diversification by encouraging farmers to cultivate horticultural crops, spices, medicinal plants, coffee plantations, and high-value commercial crops alongside traditional food grains. Such diversification has increased income opportunities while reducing production risks associated with monocropping.

Another important achievement has been the promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and farmer collectives that facilitate collective input procurement, value addition, storage, processing, and market access. Capacity-building programmes, demonstration farms, farmer training, and digital advisory services have encouraged the adoption of improved seeds, scientific nutrient management, integrated pest management, soil health improvement, and climate-smart agricultural practices. Increasing emphasis on natural farming and organic cultivation has further supported environmentally sustainable agriculture in tribal areas.

Despite these achievements, farming development continues to face several structural constraints. Limited mechanization, inadequate rural roads, insufficient cold storage facilities, weak market linkages, fragmented holdings, and inadequate digital connectivity reduce farmers' ability to realize higher returns from agriculture. Climate-induced uncertainties, including irregular rainfall, temperature fluctuations, pest outbreaks, and soil degradation, further affect agricultural productivity. Therefore, continued investment in agricultural infrastructure, digital technologies, institutional strengthening, research-extension linkages, and climate-resilient farming systems will be essential for ensuring long-term agricultural transformation under the Aspirational Districts Programme in Alluri Sitarama Raju District.

Government Interventions for Farming Development under the Aspirational Districts Programme

The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) has significantly strengthened agricultural development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District through the convergence of multiple Central and State Government schemes aimed at improving farm productivity, enhancing farmers' incomes, and promoting sustainable rural livelihoods. Agriculture and allied sectors have been recognized as key drivers of inclusive development in tribal regions where farming remains the principal occupation. Under the programme, government departments have adopted a coordinated and data-driven approach to address long-standing constraints such as inadequate

irrigation, poor market access, low agricultural productivity, fragmented landholdings, and limited technological adoption.

One of the major interventions has been the expansion of irrigation infrastructure through the implementation of Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), watershed development programmes, check dams, farm ponds, lift irrigation systems, and micro-irrigation technologies such as drip and sprinkler irrigation. These initiatives have improved water-use efficiency, reduced dependence on monsoon rainfall, and enabled farmers to cultivate multiple crops annually. Simultaneously, the Soil Health Card Scheme has facilitated scientific nutrient management by encouraging soil testing and balanced fertilizer application, thereby improving soil fertility and crop productivity.

Crop diversification has also received considerable policy attention. Farmers are encouraged to cultivate horticultural crops, coffee plantations, spices, medicinal plants, fruit orchards, and high-value commercial crops suitable for the district's agro-climatic conditions. The expansion of coffee cultivation among tribal farmers has emerged as an important livelihood intervention supported by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC), and Coffee Board of India. These initiatives have created new income opportunities while reducing dependence on traditional subsistence farming.

Institutional strengthening has been another major component of agricultural development. The promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS), and agricultural extension centres has improved farmers' access to quality inputs, institutional credit, modern technologies, and organized marketing systems. Capacity-building programmes conducted by Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), ICAR institutions, and State Agricultural Universities have increased farmers' awareness regarding improved crop management, integrated pest management, climate-resilient agriculture, post-harvest management, and value addition. Digital platforms, mobile advisory services, weather-based agro-advisories, and e-NAM have further strengthened agricultural extension and market connectivity. These coordinated interventions have laid the foundation for sustainable agricultural transformation in Alluri Sitarama Raju District.

Impact of the Aspirational Districts Programme on Agricultural Productivity and Farmers' Livelihoods

The implementation of the Aspirational Districts Programme has generated measurable improvements in agricultural productivity, livelihood diversification, and rural development across Alluri Sitarama Raju District. Although the district continues to experience geographical and infrastructural constraints, the convergence of agricultural development schemes has enhanced farmers' access to irrigation, improved agricultural technologies, institutional finance, and government support services. Consequently, farming has gradually shifted from traditional subsistence-oriented production towards more diversified and commercially viable agricultural systems.

The expansion of irrigation facilities has contributed significantly to increased cropping intensity and improved crop yields. Farmers are increasingly adopting improved seed varieties, scientific crop management practices, balanced fertilizer application, integrated pest management, and mechanized agricultural operations. Government support for horticulture has promoted the cultivation of coffee, black pepper, turmeric, ginger, mango, cashew, banana, and other plantation crops that generate higher returns than conventional cereal cultivation. These changes have diversified household income sources while reducing vulnerability to seasonal crop failures.

Livelihood security has also improved through the promotion of allied agricultural activities such as dairy farming, goat rearing, poultry, fisheries, beekeeping, and the sustainable collection of non-timber forest products. Women Self-Help Groups have actively participated in food processing, value addition, and rural entrepreneurship, thereby strengthening household incomes and women's economic empowerment. Financial inclusion initiatives have expanded farmers' access to institutional credit, crop insurance, direct benefit transfers, and digital banking services, reducing dependence on informal moneylenders.

Despite these positive developments, disparities continue to exist among remote tribal villages where access to markets, transportation, electricity, storage facilities, and digital infrastructure remains limited. Climate variability, wildlife damage, labour shortages, and fluctuating commodity prices continue to affect agricultural profitability. Nevertheless, the Aspirational Districts Programme has created a more supportive institutional environment for agricultural development by strengthening governance, improving interdepartmental coordination, and promoting evidence-based planning. These achievements demonstrate that integrated policy interventions can significantly enhance agricultural resilience and rural livelihoods in geographically disadvantaged regions.

Challenges and Constraints in Farming Development

Despite the significant progress achieved under the Aspirational Districts Programme, several structural and institutional challenges continue to constrain agricultural development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District. The district's difficult topography, extensive forest cover, dispersed tribal settlements, and limited physical infrastructure create substantial barriers to agricultural modernization and market integration. These challenges reduce the effectiveness of government interventions and limit the capacity of farmers to fully benefit from ongoing developmental programmes.

One of the most significant constraints is the heavy dependence on rainfall for agricultural production. Although irrigation infrastructure has improved in recent years, a considerable proportion of cultivated land remains rainfed, making crop production highly vulnerable to irregular monsoon patterns, prolonged dry spells, and extreme weather events associated with climate change. Increasing temperatures, soil erosion, declining soil fertility, pest infestations, and water scarcity further threaten agricultural sustainability.

Small and fragmented landholdings constitute another major obstacle to agricultural modernization. Most tribal farmers cultivate relatively small plots using traditional farming practices with limited mechanization and low capital investment. Access to certified seeds, quality fertilizers, modern farm machinery, storage facilities, cold chains, and processing infrastructure remains inadequate in many interior villages. Marketing constraints also persist due to poor road connectivity, inadequate transportation facilities, weak value chains, and the presence of intermediaries, reducing farmers' bargaining power and farm-gate prices.

Institutional challenges include limited agricultural extension services, insufficient digital literacy, inadequate awareness of government programmes, and difficulties in accessing institutional credit among remote tribal communities. The shortage of skilled agricultural personnel in remote areas further affects technology dissemination and capacity-building efforts. Wildlife damage to crops, particularly by elephants, wild boars, and monkeys, poses an additional challenge in forest fringe villages, resulting in substantial economic losses for farmers.

Addressing these constraints requires integrated investments in rural infrastructure, irrigation expansion, digital agriculture, market connectivity, climate-resilient technologies, value addition, farmer education, and institutional strengthening. Sustainable agricultural transformation will depend upon continued convergence among government departments, research institutions, local communities, and private-sector stakeholders to ensure inclusive and resilient farming systems throughout the district.

Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Farming Development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District

The long-term success of farming development under the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) in Alluri Sitarama Raju District depends on strengthening agricultural policies that address regional disparities, promote climate resilience, improve institutional coordination, and ensure inclusive growth among tribal farming communities. Although significant progress has been achieved through the convergence of various development schemes, sustained agricultural transformation requires a comprehensive strategy integrating technological innovation, natural resource conservation, market development, and social inclusion.

The foremost policy priority should be the expansion of irrigation infrastructure through watershed development, check dams, farm ponds, rainwater harvesting structures, lift irrigation systems, and micro-irrigation technologies. Given the district's dependence on monsoon rainfall, efficient water resource management is essential for improving cropping intensity, reducing production risks, and ensuring year-round agricultural activities. Simultaneously, greater emphasis should be placed on climate-smart agriculture, including drought-tolerant crop varieties, integrated farming systems, precision agriculture, agroforestry, soil conservation, and sustainable water-use practices to strengthen farmers' resilience against climate variability.

Strengthening Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and cooperative institutions is equally important for improving farmers' bargaining power, facilitating collective marketing, reducing production costs, and enhancing value addition. Government agencies should establish modern storage facilities, cold chains, food processing units, grading centres, and rural markets to minimize post-harvest losses and improve price realization. Expanding digital agriculture through mobile advisory services, weather forecasting applications, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), drone-based crop monitoring, artificial intelligence, and digital marketplaces can further modernize agricultural extension and improve farm decision-making.

Special attention should be given to tribal farmers, women cultivators, and youth by strengthening skill development programmes, agricultural entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and access to institutional credit. Capacity-building initiatives should promote organic farming, natural farming, medicinal plant cultivation, coffee-based agroforestry, spice cultivation, and other high-value enterprises suited to the district's ecological conditions. Finally, regular monitoring of developmental indicators, evidence-based planning, community participation, and interdepartmental convergence should remain central to policy implementation. These measures will contribute significantly to achieving sustainable agricultural growth, improved livelihoods, food security, and inclusive rural development in Alluri Sitarama Raju District.

Conclusion

Agriculture continues to serve as the backbone of the rural economy in Alluri Sitarama Raju District, supporting the livelihoods of a predominantly tribal population while contributing to regional food security and socio-economic development. The Aspirational Districts Programme has emerged as an important policy initiative aimed at accelerating agricultural development through evidence-based governance, convergence of development schemes, and targeted interventions in irrigation, horticulture, institutional support, infrastructure, and capacity building. The programme has significantly improved access to agricultural technologies, irrigation facilities, financial services, and extension support, thereby creating favourable conditions for sustainable farming development.

The study demonstrates that government initiatives implemented under the Aspirational Districts Programme have positively influenced agricultural productivity, crop diversification, horticultural expansion, institutional strengthening, and livelihood enhancement. Promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations, natural farming, coffee plantations, watershed development, and digital agricultural advisory services has improved farmers' access to markets, technology, and government support. Increased convergence among agriculture, horticulture, tribal welfare, rural development, and financial institutions has further strengthened the implementation of agricultural development programmes across the district.

Despite these achievements, important challenges remain. Dependence on rainfed agriculture, fragmented landholdings, inadequate mechanization, poor market infrastructure, limited storage facilities, climate variability, wildlife damage, and insufficient digital connectivity

continue to affect agricultural productivity and farmers' incomes. These structural constraints require long-term investments in rural infrastructure, irrigation expansion, climate-resilient agriculture, digital technologies, value addition, and institutional capacity building.

In the context of increasing climate change, sustainable agricultural development must move beyond productivity enhancement to include environmental conservation, social equity, and economic resilience. Future policy interventions should prioritize integrated farming systems, precision agriculture, agroforestry, organic farming, rural entrepreneurship, and digital governance while ensuring active participation of tribal communities in development planning. Strengthening research-extension linkages, promoting innovation, and enhancing institutional coordination will be essential for transforming Alluri Sitarama Raju District into a model of inclusive and sustainable agricultural development. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners seeking to strengthen agricultural policies and promote balanced regional development under the Aspirational Districts Programme.

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