



Decentralization and Grassroots Democracy – Gandhi

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Abstract: Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, had a polar opposite view of village republics. He found no merit in the mere survival of village republics that were the cause of 'the ruination of India'. It is now widely accepted that self-governing institutions at the local level are essential for national growth and for effective people's participation and that they are an integral and dispensable part of the democratic process. "Grassroots of democracy", based on small units of government enables people to feel a sense of responsibility and to inculcate the values of democracy.

Key words: democracy, Grassroots, democratic process

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that self-governing institutions at the local level are essential for national growth and for effective people's participation and that they are an integral and dispensable part of the democratic process. "Grassroots of democracy", based on small units of government enables people to feel a sense of responsibility and to inculcate the values of democracy. At the same time, it also offers a unique opportunity to participate in public affairs, including development work. In a vast, diverse and complex, subcontinent, decentralization is also a political and administrative imperative. (C.V. Raghavulu and E.A. Narayana, 1991)

Self governing rural local bodies are described in the Indian context as institutions of democratic decentralization or Panchayati Raj. This was considered a political and administrative innovation of far-reaching importance when it was first introduced in 1959. It was depicted as a mechanism of popular participation. The Panchayati Raj bodies were expected to awaken political consciousness on the countryside and to engender a democratic process in rural India. Initially, people evidenced keen interest in the Panchayati Raj

system and their representatives participated actively in local affairs, including developmental activities. (S.N. Mishra 1985, 45) With the passage of time, the initial enthusiasm and public participation had gradually diminished.

The story of Panchayati Raj has been a story of ups and downs. It seems to have passed through four distinct phases in its short span of life : The phase of ascendancy (1959-1983), the phase of stagnation (1965-1969), the phase of decline (1969-1983) and the phase of revival (1983- onwards). Some may even trace the beginnings of revival to the launching of the experiment of Panchayati Raj by the West Bengal Government even earlier. Still it cannot be denied that the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluka Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Nayaya Panchyats Act, 1983 did begin the movement for the revival of Panchayati Raj in country. Rajiv Gandhi's Government at the Centre also constituted L.M.Singhvi Committee to write a concept paper on Panchayati Raj in 1985. (Iqbal Narain 1989, 3-4)

One is skeptical about the revival of Panchayati Raj, all the more because there is a sharp polarization of opinion about its functioning. There are broadly speaking, two schools of thought on the



subject. One believes that Panchayati Raj is a God that has failed. The other suggests that Panchayati Raj has, in fact, been tried and as such the question of final verdict on its success and failure does not arise. The Asoka Mehta Committee has offered a balanced appraisal of Panchayati Raj in the context of these two schools of thought.

“Panchayati Raj should not be viewed as a God that has failed. It has many achievements to its credit, the more important of which may be identified here. Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil, making an average citizen more conscious of his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people. Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped rural people cultivate a developmental psyche.” (Government Report 1978, p.8.) The aim of this paper is to explain about Gandhiji's views on Grass root Democracy.

India lives in villages and unless village life can be revitalized the nation as a whole can hardly come alive. When India became independent in 1947, perhaps one-third of the villages of India had traditional Panchayats and many of them were far from flourishing conditions. The concept of Panchayati Raj is nothing new. It was the dream of Gandhi, the father of the nation, its need was stressed by Pandit Nehru, and it was repeatedly and forcefully advocated by Late Shri Jai Prakash Narayan. But, unfortunately, for

various reasons, not much headway could be made for the realization of this ideal. Ever since Late Shri Rajiv Gandhi came to the helm of affairs in the country he repeatedly stressed the importance of Panchayati Raj. He formed his views on the subject by under-taking whirlwind tours of rural India to familiarize himself with the realities of rural life, by holding frequent workshops of District magistrates all over the country, and thus assessing their views and understanding their difficulties. The Congress government has made a determined effort to promote the creation of Panchayats and to make them effective units of local self-government. Article 40 of the Constitution clearly declares ‘The state shall take necessary actions to organize village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government’.

The aim was to foster democratic participation, to involve villagers in the development of the community and to reduce the burden of higher level of administration. Though various steps were taken by successive governments to revitalize the system, **Gramswaraj** through village Panchayats remained as a distant dream till 1992. Bureaucratic apathy, indifference of the people, lack of political will, lack of uniformity etc were the main factors behind the failure of the system. Realizing the potential of the PR system, Rajeev Gandhi government initiated a process of Constitutional amendment to give sanctity and uniformity to Panchayati Raj system so that it can be immune from political interference and bureaucratic indifference. Rajeev Gandhi introduced 64th Constitutional amendment Bill in 1989. But the Bill did not materialize because of the fall of his Ministry. Finally



the P.V.Narasimha Rao government introduced Panchayati Raj system in India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. The 73rd Amendment Act has added a new Part in the constitution- Part Nine – consisting of 16 Articles and the 11th Schedule. The functions of the Panchayati Raj institutions have been clearly spelt out in Article 243G of the Constitution, read with Article 243 ZD and the 11th Schedule. The PRIs are supposed to be genuine institutions of local self government, not adjuncts to the implementing agencies of State governments. The constitution, which describes them as institutions of local self-government, says that this is for two specific purposes: planning for economic development and social justice and implementing these plans. Moreover, it says that this process of empowering them through devolution in order to enable them to plan and implement their own programmes of neighborhood economic development and social justice will be governed by the laws of the legislatures of the States. The Constitution says in the 11th Schedule that this empowerment shall relate or could relate to the 29 subjects listed in the Schedule. Any form of Panchayati Raj that falls short of this cannot be described as genuine Panchayati Raj.

Indigenous Polity and Grassroots Democracy

At a time when democracy was defined exclusively in terms of western representative democracy of the West (parliamentary or republican), Gandhi was for a democratic polity that would be 'centred' on the innumerable self-governing village communities, in which the individual will be the unit and 'every village will be republic or panchayat having full powers'. This would not

'exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or the world.' In such an arrangement 'there will be ever widening, never ascending circles.' (1946: 8-10) His vision was that of 'complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity...Non-violence with its technique of Satyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community.' (1942: 12) His elaborations, from time to time, on *gram swaraj* were so many attempts at an ongoing exercise to portray a holistic picture of the village republic 'though never realisable in its completeness.' (1946 (a): 16-17) Embedded in this romanticisation was the hard structural reality of rural governance that was native and indigenous to India's unparalleled complexity. During the Indian national movement, he spearheaded the establishment of village panchayats by the Congress Committee, and was fully aware of the problems these panchayats suffered from. (Professor Partha Nath Mukherji (2007: 9). Consistent with his bottom-up approach, he had proposed an alternative to the Westminster model:

There are seven hundred thousand villages in India each of which would be organised according to the will of the citizens, all of them voting. Then there would be seven hundred thousand votes. Each village, in other words, would have one vote. The villagers would elect the district administration; the district administrations would elect the provincial administration, and these in turn elect the President who is the head of the executive (Quoted by Mehta 1964: 43).

Gandhi believed that the real development of India was possible



through its indigenous political system in which the centralised state would wield only such power as was not within the scope of lower tiers of participatory governance. The state was not the architect but the facilitator of development. More positively, he was for a multi-layered autonomous vertical integration of political institutions with its base as India's villages and its superstructure at the Centre – manifesting a descending level of power over the people as one moved from base to superstructure. (In western technical parlance this is known as the principle of subsidiarity).

In the post Second World War all-pervasive western paradigm of modernity, traditional values and institutions were regarded as obstacles to development, consequently, it was in opposition to Gandhi's ideals of *gram swaraj* and *panchayati raj*. India witnessed a contestation between forces of 'modern' representative democracy, and those convinced that the inadequacies of representative democracy could only be met by making democracy more participatory through the introduction of *panchayati raj*, transforming villages into 'units of self government'. The contestation begins with the writing of the Constitution for free India.

Draft Constitution and Willful Omission of Panchayati Raj

Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, had a polar opposite view of village republics. He found no merit in the mere survival of village republics that were the cause of 'the ruination of India'. They were nothing 'but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance and communalism.' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989: 38) With an air of finality, he had concluded,

'I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.' (Ibid: 38)

The willful omission of the village panchayat from the architecture of the Indian polity met with a barrage of criticism, from the time the draft was tabled (4 November 1948) until a resolution had to be passed (22 November 1948). A host of distinguished members including, H. V. Kamath, Arum Chandra Guam, T. Parkas, K. Santana, Shebang All Sabena, Allude Krishnaswamy Ayyar, N. G. Ranga, M. Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, Mahavir Tyagi, K.T. Shah and others voiced their inability to accept this gross omission. Resolution after resolution for amendment was tabled. The points that recurrently echoed in the debate were: (i) Ambedkar's view about village republics was narrow and factually erroneous; (ii) far from villages being the cause of India's ruination, it was the villages that were ruined by colonial exploitation; (iii) the Constituent Assembly that was now engaged in scripting India's Constitution, owed its very existence to the rural masses who had contributed principally to the national movement for independence; (iv) none of the members of the Drafting Committee, except one, had participated in the freedom struggle, hence their inability to appreciate the contribution of the rural masses and their potential power to transform the country. (Ibid: 520-527)

The debates dwelled on issues of theoretical significance. Kamath posed the fundamental question: 'Now what is the State for? ...The ultimate conflict that has to be resolved is this: whether the individual is for the State or the State for the individual?' (Ibid: 221) Ranga asked, 'Sir, do we want centralisation or decentralisation? Mahatma Gandhi has



pleaded over a period of thirty years for decentralisation.' He went on to add, 'Sir, one of the most important consequences of over centralisation and strengthening of the Central Government would be handing over power not to the Central Government but to the Central Secretariat.' (Ibid 350)

When Gandhi came to learn of this willful omission, his trite observation was:

I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly (the correspondent) says that there is no mention of or direction about village panchayat and decentralisation in the fore-shadowed Constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people's voice. The greater the power of the panchayat, the better for the people.' (Quoted by Mehta 1964: 43). Finally, Ambedkar very graciously accepted the following historic resolution moved by K. Santhanam on 22 November:

That after Article 31, the following article be added: '31-A. The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989: 520; emphasis added).

Failed Experiments and Renewed Faith in Participatory Democratisation

Clearly the nationalist elite were divided in their conviction over the efficacy of the role and capacity of grassroots village-level democracy in bringing about rapid economic transformation. No less a person than Jawaharlal Nehru preferred to maintain silence during this heated debate. Steeped in the history of India that he himself had authored, he seemed

trapped between the ambiguities of western modernity, and the prospects embedded in a rich civilisational heritage. The traumatic Partition of the sub-continent (India-Pakistan) contained a stark warning for the future. It is understandable that he veered towards a centralised democratic state to keep the nation in fact and make it the agency of rapid economic development. His approach was eclectic. He spoke of a 'third way', 'which takes the best of formally existing systems – the Russian, the American and others – and seeks to create something suited to one's own history and philosophy.' (Frankel 2005: 3, citing Karanjia) Impatient for change, he went in a big way for mega-projects: multipurpose hydel projects, land reforms, irrigation schemes, modern agricultural inputs etc. to boost Indian agriculture. He put a lot of expectations in the US model of Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES) and forged a partnership with the USA to bring about rapid rural transformation through people's cooperation. Once this experiment conclusively failed, his mind was clear on the primacy that Gandhi had accorded to village-centred development and village-oriented polity. His decision to create a new Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation (18 September 1956) with S. K. Dey at its helm, testified the new resolve with which democratic decentralisation would be pursued. He never looked back thereafter.

In 1957, Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, Chairman of the Committee on Plan Projects appointed a high-level Committee under the Chairmanship of Balvantrai Mehta, a veteran Gandhian and Congressman. The Committee was mandated: (a) to review the Community



Development Programme and the National Extension Service, and (b) to evolve a system of local self-government. The Committee concluded:

Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realises its responsibilities, exercises necessary powers *through its chosen representatives* and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration (Cited in Mehta 1978: 2-3; emphasis added).

It goes to the credit of Dey that he put in place the three-tier structure of sub-State level administration in a very short period of time. The *Panchayat Samiti* became the strategic level for the formulation of the District Plan. The decentralised administrative system hereafter would be formally under elected bodies. The State of Rajasthan became the first to adopt the new scheme (2 October 1959) followed closely by Andhra Pradesh.

The qualitative changes brought about in the administrative and governing structure sought actually to *delegate* power to elected representatives of the Panchayati Raj institutions for the effective *implementation* of the Community Development Programme, *not yet in their formulation*. The development model consisted of an *intensive phase* with heavy resource flow from the Central government; to be followed by a *less intensive phase* with the expectation that heightened people's involvement will be matched by a reduced contribution from the Centre, eventually paving the way for self-sustaining development. Reality proved otherwise. This made Balwantrai Mehta to observe that a further change had to take place *'from a government programme with*

people's participation to a people's programme with government participation'. (cited in Wadhvani and Mishra 1996: 173)

In spite of the fact that by 1959 'all the States had passed the panchayat acts and by the mid-1960s panchayats were established throughout India...local administration resisted devolution of functions and powers', and regular elections were not taking place. (Kaushik 2005: 80-81) Mathew attributes this lapse on the electoral front to the fear of ascendancy of *panchayat* leadership. (Mathew 2001: 183-184)

Continuity in Gandhian Praxis: Sarvodaya Movement

After Gandhi's death in 1948, the newly constituted Sarva Seva Sangh, under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave, was committed to carry forward the programme of rural reconstruction and the creation of a *sarvodaya samaj*. Sarvodaya literally means 'welfare of all'. *Samaj* refers to 'society'. Sarvodaya Samaj is thus an ideal society in which the 'welfare of all' is guaranteed).

The movement came into limelight in the context of the fierce armed Telengana, anti-feudal struggle led by the Communist Party of India. The armed agrarian movement had to succumb to the intervention of the Indian army employed to integrate the feudatory province of Hyderabad (then under the titular rule of the Nizam) with the Indian State. The concept of voluntary gift of land for removing landlessness – *bhoodan* – was given shape and content by Vinoba when he received the first land gift of 100 acres from Ramchandra Reddy in Village Pochampalli in April 1951. (For details on the *bhoodan-gramdan* sarvodaya movement see my paper 'Sarvodaya after Gandhi.' (Mukherji 1986).)



The momentum gained in the *bhoodan* movement developed into a collective initiative for voluntary pooling of land gifts in villages for self-government (*gramdan*) through *gram sabhas* (village assemblies). The movement attracted nationalist freedom fighters like Jayaprakash Narayan, Balvantrai Mehta and others. Millions of acres of lands in gift (*bhoodan*) and thousands of village-in-gifts (*gramdan*) became unmanageable for the movement to control even as the government dragged its feet over lands to be redistributed. The All India Panchayat Parishad (AIPP) under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan received support from Nehru, and the Ministry of Community Development and Panchayati Raj and Cooperation. It consistently pressed for legislation that would make Article 40 of the Constitution mandatory.

Reverse Swing towards Centralisation and Authoritarianism

The regime after Nehru did not subscribe to democratic decentralisation. On 24 January 1966, the day Indira Gandhi assumed office as Prime Minister, the Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation was 'closed and merged with the extensive empire of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Irrigation. (Dey 1982: 89)

The new agricultural strategy relied on centrally-sponsored programmes such as, 'Intensive Agricultural District Programme, Small Farmers Development Agency, Drought Prone Area Programme, Intensive Tribal Development Programme, etc. downgrading the Ministry of Community Development into a department under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture.' (Kaushik 2005: 81)

Indira Gandhi's regime spanning 24 January 1966 till 24 March 1977,

followed a continuous policy of centralisation of power, culminating ultimately in the National Emergency and imposition of the President's Rule on 25 June 1975. The convincing defeat of the Congress Party in the General Elections after the withdrawal of the Emergency was a lesson for Indira Gandhi and the country that democracy in India had come to stay.

Restoration of Democracy and the Process of Democratic Decentralisation

Immediately on assumption of power by the then opposition Janata Party, the process of decentralisation was revived with the Asoka Mehta Committee reopening the subject. The most significant feature of the Committee's report was the linking of 'institutions of democratic decentralisation with socially motivated economic development.' (Mehta 1978: 6) In contrast to the key importance given to the block-level Panchayat Samiti by Balvantrai Mehta in the formulation of district plans, it was suggested that 'the district should be the first point of decentralisation, under popular supervision, below the State level.' (Ibid: 178)

The dissenting note by the veteran Gandhian Siddharaj Dhadda pointed out that the 'very foundation of the structure of Panchayati Raj was missing.' (Mehta 1978: 173) The 'purpose of decentralisation was not merely to help development, however it is defined, but the creation of an integrated structure of self-governing institutions from the village and small town onwards, to the national level in order to enable people to manage their own affairs.' (Mehta 1978: 173) Dhadda was invoking the principle of subsidiarity, which Gandhi had spelt out for *gram swaraj*. The distinguished Marxist leader Nambudiripad could not



'think of PRIs (PRIs refer to Panchayati Raj Institutions.) as anything other than the integral parts of the country's administration with no difference between what are called "development" and "regulatory" functions.' (cited in Kaushik 2005: 103). He observed, 'I am afraid that the ghost of the earlier idea that PRIs should be completely divorced from all regulatory functions is haunting my colleagues.' (cited in Kaushik 2005: 104) He, too, was for nothing short of comprehensive devolutionary democracy.

Article 40 Vindicated

The pragmatist in Rajiv Gandhi, successor to Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, finally vindicated the Gandhian position. He was confronted with a straightforward question: How is it that only ten per cent of the enormous revenue of the State reached the village for the uplift of the poor beneficiaries? His answer was forthright:

If we continue to devise schemes from above large sections of the populations will be left high and dry, and flow of benefits from development will pass over their heads like water on a ducks back, for it is not possible for government agencies to reach each and every individual and to guide him and tell him to do this or that. (cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004: 148)

He argued that it was quite 'apparent that if our district administration is not sufficiently responsive, the basic reason [was] that *it [was] not sufficiently representative.*' (cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004: 150 emphasis added). When the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution were enacted, India had created history in democratic practice and governance. For the first time the institutionalised organs of participatory democracy constituted the *third stratum*

of the Indian state, empowered by affirmative action requiring one-third representation of elected women members and functionaries, and the representation of *dalits*¹⁸ (Ex-untouchable castes.)

in proportion to their population in the region. The structural requirement enabling them to shape as agents of their destiny and that of the nation was met. What they needed now was only to comprehend and realise the power that is vested in them to surmount the cultural, political and class barriers that come in the way.

Prospects and Challenges for the 21st Century

In the past 13 years, almost all states, with the notable exception of Jammu and Kashmir, have gone through the process of electing the PRI functionaries conforming to the 73rd Amendment at least once. Elections have taken place in 504 District Panchayats (*Zila Parishads*), 5,912 Block *Panchayat Samitis* and 231,630 *Gram* (Village) *Panchayats*. Corresponding to each of these tiers of sub-State governance, 1,581; 145,412; and 2,971,446 – a total of 3,132,673 – representatives have been directly elected from their respective constituencies. More than a million of these are women and above 800,000 belong to the Scheduled Castes (*dalits*) and the Scheduled Tribes. The Houses of Parliament have elected 800 members, whilst the 28 States and two Union Territories have elected 4,508 members. The sheer size of the elected members from the village panchayats to the national parliament is a staggering 3,137,754. (Mathew 2003: 20) Democracy



in India has reached a new threshold, unprecedented in the world.

Yet devolution of power is easier enacted than promulgated. The problem of devolution takes two forms. *First*, when out of the list of 29 subjects (Ghosh 2000: 37) that have been recommended for devolution by the XI Schedule of the Constitution, there is a wide variation between States on the number of subjects *actually* devolved (administrative devolution). *Second*, when the financial resources of the local governments are incommensurate with the administrative responsibilities reposed on them (fiscal devolution). As of now, eight States and one Union Territory, in letter, if not all in spirit, have devolved all the 29 subjects to the panchayati raj institutions. (The states are Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan and West Bengal. The Union Territory is: Dadra and Nagar Haveli.) (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2006)

We cannot remain oblivious to the numerous problems that confront the world's largest and most complex democracy. It is not within the scope of this presentation to get into these. I shall mention only 12 challenges to our system of local self-government, if only to keep us anchored to reality.

(1) There is the factor of the local political economy and the high probability of elite capture of resources.

(2) Central and State-level political elite feel threatened having to vie with the local political elite, trying to win support from a common constituency.

(3) The non-elected resource-rich NGOs/INGOs with their primary accountability to the donors operate within *panchayat* jurisdictions as

competing structures of influence and power.

(4) There are State and central-level projects that bypass the authority of the PRIs.

(5) Problems of accountability and transparency often associated with rent-seeking behaviour characterise many functionaries at all levels.

(6) *Gram sabhas*, which are the fundamental units of direct democracy, are often convened at irregular intervals with poor attendance.

(7) There is the problem of what is known as 'proxy panchayats', where the husband/male members of the family act on behalf of the elected women representatives.

(8) Social-institutional barriers often inhibit the role of *dalits* (the Scheduled Castes) and the Scheduled Tribes in the *Panchayati Raj* system.

(9) A resistant bureaucracy is tardy in implementing devolution of power.

(10) Political and economic clientelism in an iniquitous agrarian and caste structure perpetuates the role of dominant powers.

(11) There are problems relating to ambiguities in the distribution and sharing of power at the various sub-State levels.

(12) Most importantly, there are problems of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition that provide structural barriers to the improvement in life-chances of the deprived and marginal groups.



In conclusion, we can say that Village Panchayats have a long history in India. They represent a system of governance prevalent in ancient India. Gandhiji had aptly remarked that independence must begin at the bottom. Every village ought to be a republic or panchayat with the authority and resources to realize the potential for economic and social development of the village. In several states are PRI election lead to violence and local tensions. This kind of disharmony and politicization affects the legitimacy and spirit of democratic decentralization.

The necessitates the decentralization of democracy to the lowest level. India has embarked on this great experiment through the introduction of Panchayati Raj. True, there are problems at the moment. But the path of great goals is never smooth. Let us take the lessons from the problems and overcome them with greater conviction and commitment. The dialectics of contestation has entered a new phase after the constitutional breakthrough. The *process* of contestations that I have highlighted in the presentation points to the resultant, irreversible ascendance of the *forces* of *gram swaraj*. It must be distinguished from the wave of decentralisation in many developing countries prompted by structural adjustment programmes since the 1980s that seek efficient service delivery as its main objective. Decentralisation per se is not necessarily democratisation. Neither *deconcentration* nor *delegation* of power is a sufficient condition for effective democratisation. What is important is real *devolution* of power to the constitutionally-elected representatives at the level of local self-government. Had Babasaheb Ambedkar been with us today, he would have been

pleased to note that the serious apprehensions he had nurtured about *panchayati raj* at the time of drafting the Constitution, no longer remain in the same measure. Had Gandhi been alive he would remind us that if only the people were able to hold on steadfastly to truth, non-violence and love the process would be so much the easier.

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