

Middle Class, Religious Rituals, and The Future of Democracy in India

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of the middle class can be found everywhere in the world and developing countries in Asia are being at the forefront of this trend. The former type of research used to be deduced through the confirmation that economic wellbeing and democracy are positively correlated. Yet, accepting the sweeping account that the rise of the middle class has promoted democracy at face value may not be helpful in explaining why conflict persists globally. Diametrically opposed to the idea of rational economy, primordial difference, which tends to promote identity politics, remains to be the driver for conflict within and between countries. Using the intervening variable of religion, this research endeavored to highlight how the rise of the middle class in India affects the democratic run of the country. This research found that the increasing middle class in India has elevated religiosity through the intrusion of religious elements in public realm. This, eventually, results to, among others, the strengthening of the existing social structure, which was organized around the principle of hierarchy and social discrimination.

Keywords: middle class, religion, democracy, caste, India.

Meningkatnya jumlah kelas menengah telah menjadi tren global, terutama di negara-negara berkembang di Asia. Penelitian terdahulu biasanya digunakan untuk menunjukkan bahwa kesejahteraan ekonomi dan demokrasi berkorelasi positif. Namun, hal tersebut, bila dikaitkan dengan meningkatnya jumlah kelas menengah, tidak mampu menjelaskan masih tingginya konflik di level global. Keberadaan perbedaan primordial sebagai dasar politik identitas, yang jelas berkebalikan dengan rasionalitas ekonomi, tetap menjadi pendorong konflik, baik di dalam maupun antar negara. Dengan menggunakan variabel antara berupa agama, penelitian ini menjelaskan bagaimana tumbuhnya kelas menengah di India mempengaruhi jalannya demokrasi. Penelitian ini menemukan fakta bahwa meningkatnya jumlah kelas menengah India telah meningkatkan religiusitas melalui masuknya elemen religius dalam ranah publik. Kondisi ini menyebabkan menguatnya struktur sosial pengkastaan yang ada, yang selama ini didasarkan pada prinsip hierarki dan diskriminasi sosial.

Kata-Kata Kunci: kelas menengah, demokrasi, kasta, India.

In the last decade, Asia has been at the forefront of world economic development due to the boom of the middle class and the high economic expenses created. As seen in Table 1, Asia is now running after Europe in terms of the numbers of the middle class, and it will likely remain growing in the near future, noticing that European countries are now facing a diminishing economic trend.

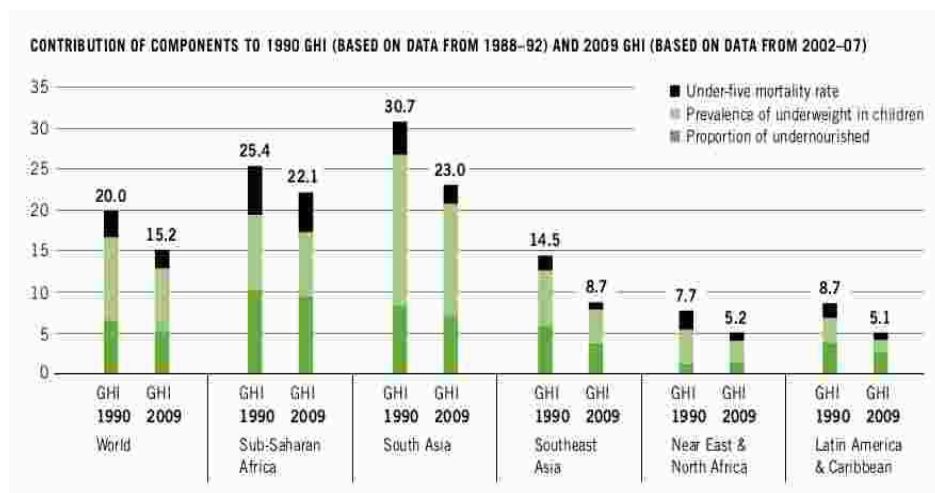
Table 1. The Emerging Middle Class in Developing Countries

	Number of people (millions and global share)		Consumption (millions PPP US\$ and global share)	
North America	338	18%	5602	26%
Europe	664	36%	8138	38%
Central and South America	181	10%	1534	7%
Asia Pacific	525	28%	4952	23%
Sub-Saharan Africa	32	2%	256	1%
Middle East and North Africa	105	6%	796	4%
World	1845	100%	21.278	100%

Source: Kharas 2010, 16.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that the increase of the middle-class does not necessarily associate with the rise of equality, the likelihood is equal for conflict to emerge in countries with large number of middle class. This is because the exponential number of the middle class cannot automatically erase problems at the bottom line of the society, where chronic injustice concerning distribution of basic needs, including food, shelter, and education persist. As seen in Graph 1, the exponential prevalence of underweight in children in South Asia and the cumulative hunger index of Southeast Asia and South Asia persist despite the booms of the middle class in Asia. Eventually, as many research confirmed, people who are economically disadvantaged, politically disenfranchised, and socially excluded, tend to be the main promoter of conflict in society.

Graph 1. World and region-wise Global Hunger Index 1990 and 2009



Source: Global Hunger Index 2009.

While most conflict are blamed to be based on material cause and promoted by people at the margin, not many research are trying to see how the middle class whose life are better off take part in the promotion of both conflict and peace in their home country. Asia is chosen because the region, based on the studies conducted by World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and African Development Bank, show the largest increase of the middle class. However, in order to get a focus for the study, India is purposely selected as a case study on grounds that the Indian middle class are growing exponentially in numbers and despite being the largest democracy in the world, India is prone to hostilities (India scores 2,569 and ranks 142 out of 158 countries assessed in 2012 Global Peace Index, see Table 2 below).

Table 2. India in 2012 Global Peace Index

GPI Indicators	Score	GPI Indicators	Score
Perceived criminality in society	5.0	Terrorist acts	3.0
Security officers and police	1.0	Deaths from conflict (internal)	1.5
Homicides	2.0	Military expenditure	1.0
Jailed population	1.0	Armed services personnel	1.0
Access to weapons	4.0	UN peacekeeping funding	1.0

Organized conflict (internal)	3.0	Heavy weapons	1.0
Violent demonstrations	3.0	Military capabilities	4.0
Violent crime	1.3	Displaced people	1.0
Political instability	4.0	Neighboring country relations	3.0
Political terror	1.0	Conflicts fought	5.0
Weapons imports	4.0	Deaths from conflict (external)	2.0

Source: GPI Index 2012.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, the paper attempts to find out the role of the middle class in promoting democratization in India. Second, taking religion as the intervening variable for explanation, this paper attempts to investigate the expression of religiosity among the middle class and how it shapes the dynamics of democratic life in India. Reflecting on the objective of the paper, the research questions are therefore formulated as follow: (1) how do the Indian middle-class view religion and express their religiosity in public? (2) what impact do these middle-class give to the process of democratization in India?

Middle-Class in India: A Conceptual Framework

Applying the word class in India is quite tricky. This is because many Indians believe that their country is not structured on the basis of economic class, but on cultural caste instead. A 10-month field research in India brought to a tantalizing fact that, despite the globally shared objection toward class stratification particularly from the Leftists, having a class-based society is something that most Indians desire. Most Indians believe that a class-based society is an alternative to caste-less society, and of all the other alternatives a class-based society will bring India out of its laggard while fully embracing a modern society. As long as caste keeps holding on the vein of the society, they believe that it will be difficult to attain societal welfare and politically democratic society (field observation August 2009 – June 2010).

A caste and a class are similar in the sense that each is a form of stratification, but the way the system works is different from each other. As illustrated in Table 3 below, a caste is different from class in ways that it offers a rigid hierarchical system in society; it creates a relatively closed and stationary form of stratification since it is tightly preserved through endogamous marriage, hence keeping the occupational lineage on

grounds of family hereditary; and it is culturally justified through social institutions.

Table 3. The differences between caste and class

	Caste	Class
Type of hierarchy	Rigid	Less rigid
Form of stratification	Relatively immobile, stationary	Relatively mobile
Preservation method	Closed, endogamous marriage	Open, performance-based appraisal
Characteristic	Family hereditary, given	Individual qualifications, competitive
Basis for justification	Cultural codification, social institutions	Labor relations and regulation, legal institutions
Structure created	Unidentified	Pyramidal

Source: Own interpretation based on Cox 1944.

Social change and social mobility is a two-way process and, it includes some factors that must work simultaneously. In general terms, some factors that use to be associated with this process are industrialization, urbanization, education, and democratic politics. But, without undermining the importance of each of the factors, the paper proposes that in the case of India, special-forces named sanskritisation, reservation, and migration are deemed much important to note than any other factors considered.

Sanskritisation

Sanskritisation, firstly coined by S.M. Srinivas, is a process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal changes its customs, rituals, ideology or way of life in the direction of high or, frequently, dwija (i.e. the twice born caste) to refer to the second and the third rank in caste system, or Kshatriya and Vaisya, respectively. The emulation takes place not only in forms of attitude, but also in the ascription of the last name which used to refer the type of traditional occupation inherited in one's family, hence situate one's location in the caste system. By change one's family name, it is expected that the social stigma associated with one's low caste root would be erased consequently.

The writer personally questions the effectiveness of the sanskritisation. To the writer's opinion, social stigma cannot easily be wiped away by name changing, because people within the same localities would still

recognize the low-caste root one's family had already been associated with. Except when name changing is accompanied with migration, sanskritisation offers no grounds for immediate social acceptance to anyone purposely changing its fate through changing one's rituals alone. What's more, the current reservation program promoted by the government in response to the universal human rights standards drive the iteration of family name by disadvantaged groups in society, including those who had sanskritised themselves. This act of de-sanskritisation is strategic since they are automatically entitled to 27% of central government jobs and university admissions, a privilege that they had never had before (The Wall Street Journal 2011).

Reservation

The word reservation in India refers to the vast and growing affirmative-action program trying to engineer advancement for the underclass in Indian society. The spirit for reservation is enshrined in Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality to all. In reservation program, the government set out the benefactors to be fall among three elements (i) ST (scheduled caste), which refers to the Dalits or the outcaste, (ii) ST (scheduled tribes), which refers to indigenous forest-dwellers, and (iii) OBC (other backward castes), which refers to the underprivileged Muslims. Critics to this program address the impact of inter-caste resentment due to the quota system allotted to the reserved groups, which favorably undermining the merit-based competition that should primarily be established for Indians to keep its pace of development. The danger in using caste as a development tool, critics say, is that the government is perpetuating ancient divisions that still run deep.

Although reservation policy is eluded by outside commentators as one of the breakthrough in Indian politics, statistics does not prove much since then. Currently, India remains home to the largest number of poor and hungry people in the world. According to the Times of India, one-third of the world's poor people live in India that is equal to 1.4 billion Indians (The Times of India 2008). According to the World Bank, 42 percent of its population (around 450 million) still lives with less than \$1.25 a day, which is below the new international poverty line. More than 6 million of those desperately poor Indians live in Mumbai alone; they live in super-sized slums and improvised housing (The Times of India 2008).

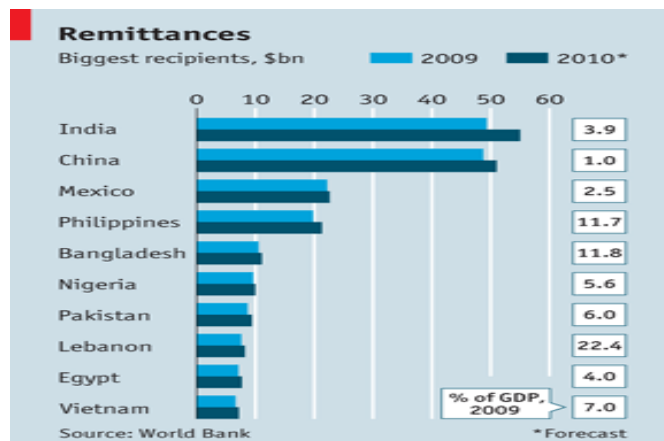
Migration

For Indians, migration enables not only the accumulation of wealth but also social transformation for the migrant individually and the migrant family, altogether. India remains the second largest immigrant group in the world after China and Indian diaspora are increasingly elaborated in

popular culture, showing that out-migration from India is an established phenomena. Syed Ali, who researched Hyderabad as a case study to this phenomenon, explained that young Indians perceive migration as an easy escape from the constrained social system. According to Ali (2007), “being a migrant *in itself* has become a status marker...They (the migrants) become highly valued commodities, irrespective of what they were before the transforming act of migration...Those who manage to get abroad are seen as victorious, and to the victor go the spoils” (Ali 2007, 46).

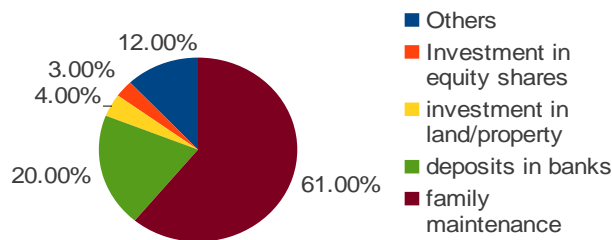
Migration thus, provides financial capital as much as social capital for the ascription of the middle class. It has an enormous impact not only on the marriage prospects of an individual but also for larger self-development since it creates the new notion of caste which revolves around the notion of Non-Resident India or NRI. The term NRI refers to anyone working and living abroad. As seen in two figures below, Indian is of the country being top receivers of remittance from abroad (Graph 2) and at home funds generated from sent remittances is a source for either consumption or further investment (Graph 3).

Graph 2. Top flow of remittance to developing countries



Source: <http://www.economist.com/node/17467174>.

Graph 3. Average end-use pattern of NRI remittances in 2009



Source: <http://www.oifc.in/Resources/News/Nature-of-remittance-flows-into-India-from-the-Indian-diaspora>.

Indian Middle-class and Religiosity

Based on the elaboration of how the middle class come to appear in Indian caste society, it is important to note that it may be interested to include many factors in defining who the middle-class is apart from the economic indicator. This paper, too, will not count anything to do with middle-class population in India on economic base, but on non-economic base instead. Also, empirical observation in main cities in India has convincingly found that, despite the ability of some families to pave their way to the middle-class level, majorities of people remain struggling to keep alive on day-to-day basis. In confirmation to the empirical finding, the widening gap of rich and poor in India is indicated from the high rates of suicide among poor farmers (Todhunter 2012).

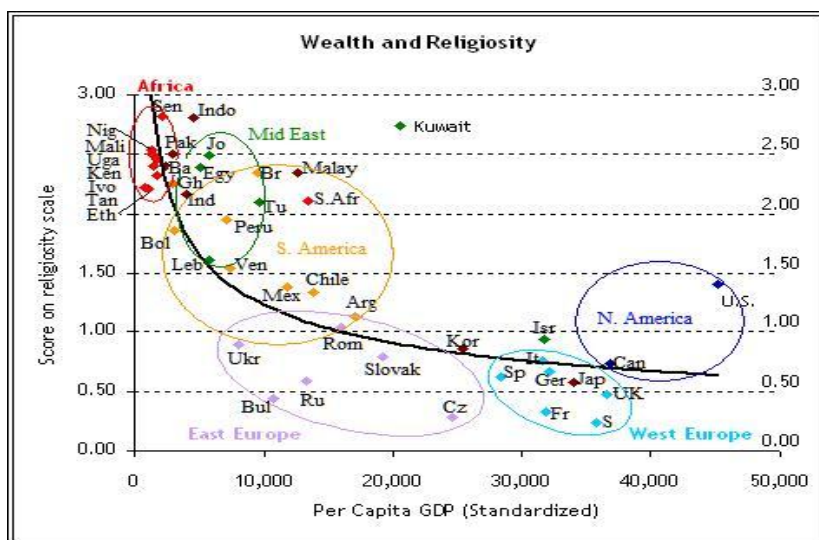
Based on the sanskritisation approach, the middle-class would include anyone who successfully led themselves up to the ladder of the society through the emulation of cultural practice, name changing, or religious conversion. According to the reservation approach, the middle-class are those who get the net-benefit from the affirmative-action programs in diverse field of life, including education, employment, and political participation. According to the migration approach, the middle-class class refers to anyone who is able to pool the financial and social capital and use them strategically to legitimate their standing in society economically and socially.

Of these three approaches explained, some of the emblematic expressions that can be seen among the Indian middle-class are the use of English language and the adoption of religious rituals. To begin with, English language is conceived of as the ability that must be retained by every

educated middle-class. The ability to speak English in good grammar and with good pronunciation is holding a key to good occupation in bureaucracy or educational institutions, both of which are strongly associated with clean, educated, and high pay-off salaries job. While English are not used as the language instruction in public schools, English are considered to be utmost important for retaining a better or an already good standard of life. India is in fact the second largest English user country in the world after the U.S.

Religious ritual is another type of expression, which is strengthened among the middle-class in India. According to the 2007 State of the Nation survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) among Indians, the level of religiosity has gone up considerably in the past five years. Only 5 per cent of the respondents said that their religious belief had declined, while 30 per cent said they had become more religious. The same poll found that education and exposure to modern urban life seem to make Indians more, not less, religious: "Urban educated Indians are more religious than their rural and illiterate counterparts...religiosity has increased more in small towns and cities than in villages" (Nanda 2008). So, contrary to the common assumption that religiosity will automatically decrease as wealth increase, the case of India shows the other way round. As illustrated in Graph 4 below, India stands together with other rising economies in Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia.

Graph 4. Religiosity Increase as Wealth Increase



Source: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04/world-publics-welcome-global-trade-but-not-immigration/>

In India, one measurable indicator for this trend is the tremendous rise in pilgrimages or religious tourism. Religious trips, according to a recent study by the National Council for Applied Economic Research, account for more than 50 per cent of all package tours, much higher than leisure tour packages at 28 per cent (Nanda, 2008). This rising religiosity is well dispersed among any Indian middle-class irrespective of their religious background, whether Hindus, Muslims, Christians, or Sikhs. Apart from pilgrimages, daily rituals are being more elaborated as more and more Indian middle-class are participating in religious rituals in temples and in ceremonies like pujas through donations and charities. According to Nanda (2008), “it is becoming fashionable to be religious and to be seen as being religious.”

Although the question “why” is not formulated in the research question of this paper, it is important to complete the picture of rising religiosity by knowing what make it happen. The Indian scientist and historian Meera Nanda (2008) explained that this had something to do with economic wellbeing and defensive reaction to modernization and Westernization. The more people surrounded with well to do life economically, the more people feel insecure existentially. Religion is then treated as a refuge for the deep-seated feeling of alienation and loneliness, mostly suffered by many urbanites, those who are uprooted from the old, secured, and warm little communities they left behind in villages. A consolation to God and the company of fellow believers are then kept well to remedy the traumatic feeling of lost and loneliness in the hectic and consumed life of the cities.

Middle Class, Religion, and Democracy

The wellbeing of the modern middle-class in India is founded upon white-collar jobs and professional positions. These jobs and positions provide not only financial security but also prestige in society. But, unlike the traditional Hindu middle-class of the *dwijas* (i.e. the second born castes of *Khsatriyas* and *Vaisyas*), modern middle-class are not grounded on established foundation of cultural status to fall back on. Instead, there are two strategies that are commonly utilized for creating a sound basis for the current cultural status. First, through direct political participation aimed at gaining public support or legitimation based on popularity is crucial for self-esteem. Second, through indirect political participation in party politics, which strengthen family membership in local party affiliation.

Strategies like rallying the cause for issues concerning “social justice” or “empowerment to the oppressed communities” will likely pave the way to withdraw popular support from particular groups subject to privilege,

while drawing apathy from other groups underprivileged by the same policy. This was effectively elaborated in 1980s when intermediary or middle-class groups started its political agitation in several parts of India and emerged as important political forces. Due to their strong representation in the BJP, which came to power in 1977, they launched campaign for protective discrimination. As a result, Mandal Commission was set up and identified 3,248 castes or communities as Other Backward Castes (OBCs) or comparable to 52.4 percent of Indian population. The commission made controversial recommendation that 27 percent of government jobs be reserved for OBCs, in addition to the 22 percent quota for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The rift spiraled into anti-reservation violence in many states in India, up until now (Mehra 2000).

Many Indians consider politics as something dirty, but at the same time they also acknowledge that politics is powerful and pregnant with capacity to empower people. Ellis, in his research on middle class politics in Chennai, found that more suspicion is given to party politics as when he asked, “what does it mean to say that someone is ‘into politics’?”, he found among his respondents similar sentiments that those who were political were dishonest, corrupt, and ineffective. One of his respondents answered, “he/she wants to make money for them and their many more generations to come. A secured life where the bureaucrats, police, and official machinery, are all at your disposal. You are above the law because there is not even a single instance in the history of our country for convicting a corrupt politician” (Ellis 2011).

Nevertheless, the popularity of BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), a Dalits-based political party led by Mayawati, in Uttar Pradesh, however, shows that politics is nowadays a card that even outcaste and low caste community play. The prominence of BSP among the Dalits and low caste has helped them to organize politically so as to give voice and dignity that have long been denied. Although Mayawati has assumed power in February 2012 election and her leadership has invited both praise and critics, many believe that she and her party have successfully transformed Dalits identity (Dearing 2012). Critics against this view, however, stemmed from the Mayawati's direction to establish statues of prominent Dalits in public places, including herself. Hence, unable to break the longstanding caste division in society and to solidify her constituents through economic empowerment and political adequacy, Mayawati drew popular support by political act of controversies aimed at destroying the Dalits' wretched images in public perception. Unfortunately, lack of concrete policy to improve social welfare, Mayawati's policy failed either to pick up the poverty stricken Uttar Pradesh or to recuperate the fate of the Dalits (Ramakrishnan 2011).

The success of BSP in drawing popular support from the Dalits and the low castes is in fact in parallel with the credentials of BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) among its constituents, mostly drawn from Hindu conservatives. Although BSP and BJP's contenders are diametrically in opposition to each other, both actually rest on primordial line of religious symbols. Many of the BJP's constituents were actually drawn from the ACP (All-India Congress Party). ACP's (All-India Congress Party) constituents were once built upon young dynamic middle class and secularist in orientation, but given its undemocratic nature of the dynastic political leadership, the party is unable to keep hold of its constituents. Other than that, the currently changing orientation of the educated middle class toward secularism also had some contribution to their disconnection with ACP. For many middle-classes, secularism is equated with Nehruvian's leftist-nationalist ideology and the failure of the Congress party to deliver strong and stable political economy. Indian economic stagnation in 1980s which was soon followed with high inflation in 1990s forced India to accept not only IMF with its money, but also its Western-base ideology which is now proven to be corrosive to India's cultural identity. Given the feeling of insecurity in face of volatile economic downturn and, consequently, political imbalance, the idea to go back to where one root is became interesting for many educated middle class. Hence, lamenting on the idea to preserve cultural identity, the adoption of traditional religious symbols in public space is no longer seen as decadent and punctilious, but deliberate and virtuous instead.

Conclusion

India has weak middle-class, due to the highly unequal patterns of income distribution and stratified social structures. The political correlation of this system is found in the frequent social conflict and volatile and populist politics. In India, the rise of the middle class is not always associated with improvement in level of education, employment, or wages, but almost always dealt with traditional lineage instead. Hence, despite Indians more common support for democratic ideas—including the abolition of discrimination, respect to equal rights, and promotion of egalitarian freedom—the inevitability of the caste system for the Hindus is something that will always challenge Indian democracy. Even with the current emergence of the modern middle-class and the provision of the reservation policy for underprivileged groups in society, disparities continue to underlie and is visible part of the society.

Middle class' increasing affinity toward religious ideas, rituals, and expression in public, when associated with democratic polity, may indicate the inevitability of identity politics in India. Indeed, identity politics has always set afoot in India, but unlike the old type of politics,

which rested on strictly divisive communalism, what is now selling in Indian political market is traditional cross-community linkages with some sense of political economic proximity. This is to say that although class awareness has gradually sipped into the vein of the Indian politics, caste will remain to hold a center stage in drawing up Indian democracy. Socially, the rise of the caste affiliated parties is only one of the small manifestations that show the vivid expression of religious attachment among the middle class. As long as these parties do not fall into abetting the identity sentiments of their constituents and rather attempt to advocate people's empowerment, future democracy in India will likely be strong. Yet, the description shows that many parties which based on caste or, say, religious affiliation run into political mobilization among its own people, hence likely to destabilize the democratic values and institutions that currently are being exercised.

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