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Caste: Violations of Dalit human rights

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Caste: Violations of Dalit human rights

Abstract

Overview: Historically, the caste system in India has created the means and opportunity for the exploitation of Dalit communities. Caste itself is a form of social stratification that assigns individuals specific permanent identities in scheduled groups at birth. Dalits are members of the outcaste community and are considered "untouchables" or "impure." According to a recent census in India, there are roughly two hundred and sixty million Dalits living in India (Mandal 149). Due to the cultural belief of being polluted, millions of Dalits continuously face human rights violations that shape every aspect of their lives from birth to death. In this essay, I argue caste based discrimination continues to create and sustain social conditions that deprive the Dalit community of basic human rights. Furthermore, these forms of discrimination ultimately shape the actions, behaviors and relationships that influence the way of life for all members of India's society.

Author's Reflection: I am currently a sophomore and intend on beginning the nursing program the fall semester of 2020. I choose to write on the topic of caste based discrimination after learning about it in my freshman learning community. The most challenging aspect of writing the paper for me personally is forming a thesis for which the essay is based on. Another challenge I often face is how to incorporate differing perspectives to argue for or against the thesis of an essay. The most rewarding aspect of the writing process is seeing how I'm able to grow as a student over time. Looking back at my work from previous semesters, it's clear that my writing ability has improved significantly from one-on-one instruction with professors.

Having the experience of taking a 199 course has taught and sharpened skills required to clearly express and frame ideas in formal writing. For instance, the course has instructed me to not only identify sources but to also thoroughly examine the contexts to ensure it is suitable to include in a paper. The ability to analyze sources is what provides you adequate evidence in support of the thesis or prompt. Regardless of the context you are writing about, having the ability to express your opinions with supporting evidence is crucial.

Professor Singh's Reflection: Alex Voglewede is an extraordinary student who is sincere in his efforts in learning and very meticulous in his work ethic. A very kind, courteous and respectful person as well - a professor's dream student! This paper is a result of all these wholesome aspects of Alex. In addition, he is very sympathetic towards those affected by injustice and is critical of oppressive structures - a rare gem as a young man at Fisher! Alex was in my LC class and did extremely well and I was happy to see him in my 199 class. As a studious student, Alex followed the scaffolding steps very carefully and methodically. He chose to work on the novel and film combinations of *Slum Dog Millionaire*. Students could choose to write about any aspect of their choice of novel and film transformative processes. Alex chose to address the issue of caste system in India, which is not explicit in the story. He carefully follows the protagonist's suffering despite his efforts to tackle oppressive cultural forces. He beautifully and powerfully captures the struggle of the protagonist in a caste context. He provides a clear social and cultural analysis. Alex and I had long conversations on the issue of caste-based oppression in India. Alex really wanted to gain a thorough understanding of the problem before placing his protagonist and his cultural context in his analytical lens and pages. Alex is a curious learner and that quality has led to a great paper. I am proud of his work, and his personhood.

Alex Voglewede

Professor Singh

Research Based Writing

25 March 2019

Caste: Violations of Dalit human rights

Introduction

Historically, the caste system in India has created the means and opportunity for the exploitation of Dalit communities. Caste itself is a form of social stratification that assigns individuals specific permanent identities in scheduled groups at birth. Dalits are members of the outcaste community and are considered “untouchables” or “impure.” According to a recent census in India, there are roughly two hundred and sixty million Dalits living in India (Mandal 149). Due to the cultural belief of being polluted, millions of Dalits continuously face human rights violations that shape every aspect of their lives from birth to death. In this essay, I argue caste based discrimination continues to create and sustain social conditions that deprive the Dalit community of basic human rights. Furthermore, these forms of discrimination ultimately shape the actions, behaviors and relationships that influence the way of life for all members of India’s society.

Since the caste system is intertwined with almost all aspects of society, many current award winning novels capture it’s cultural and social relevance. An example of this is seen in the novel *Q & A*, by Vikas Swarup. Swarup published the novel in 2005 while working as an Indian diplomat in South Africa. After the book’s release, Swarup has continued his work in the political field serving in other countries including the United States of America and is currently the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India. Due to the popularity and impeccable reviews from the novel, director Danny Boyle created and released a film version

called *Slumdog Millionaire*. The film interpretation of the novel was released in December of 2008 and won an Academy Award for Best Picture in 2009. According to a popular film review website called Rotten Tomatoes, ninety percent of the viewers reported to have thoroughly enjoyed the film. To strengthen my argument on current forms of discrimination and how it effects behaviors, I will compare the movie and novel to convey differing perspectives.

Q & A (2005) follows the story of a poor lower caste member named Ram Mohamad Thomas who was arrested after winning a television quiz show in India called, “Who Will Win a Billion?” Ram was arrested on suspicion of cheating because it was thought to be impossible that an uneducated outcaste orphan could possibly know the answers. Throughout the book, there are many flashbacks into the past, in which Ram informs a lawyer of his childhood and all the challenges he faced. These challenges include information about his previous life that have been affected by caste based discrimination and human rights violations. Some of the stories include: a conversation he had with an Australian Army Officer while providing tours of the Taj Mahal for money to afford food, Father Thomas who was a priest that acted like a parent by giving him a place to stay off the streets, his time working in a restaurant and more. Coincidentally, random events from his troubled childhood provided the answers to the quiz questions, winning him millions of dollars.

Throughout this essay, I reference an article by Bankim Mandal titled “Caste Discrimination, Deprivation and the Socio-Economic Development of Dalits.” Mandal is an accredited college professor and author of a book titled *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*.” The information discussed within the book serves as the foundation to my argument. In the essay Mandal asserts, “Caste-based discrimination and exclusion violates all human rights norms” (149). Mandal believes that the division of people into separate social groups creates an

environment that promotes the exploitation and abuse of others. In agreement, my essay will explore how the caste system causes violations of the basic human rights of Dalits, while also incorporating different perspectives from the varying caste identities.

To direct the focus of this essay, I identify and examine three main questions regarding the caste system. The first one being, what are the origins of the caste system and why is it still prevalent in today's society? The inclusion of this question on caste origins will reveal why and when the caste system was originally created to provide historical background and proper understanding of this topic. To answer this question, I refer to an article by Samar Mandal titled "Caste System and the Present Society: Some observations on Ambedkar's view" which clearly analyzes three different theories concerning the original creation and modern day version of the caste system. Subsequently, I explore the current types of human rights violations towards the Dalit community that have been the result of discriminatory hierarchical behaviors and relationships between castes. This will help to identify forms of discrimination that directly result in lower quality of life and health for Dalits. Lastly, I address recent government actions to legally abolish the caste system along with current activist groups advocating for equal rights and opportunities. To explore this question, I will review the work of three leading university professors in the field of South Asian Studies and government policies in an article titled, "Low Caste in India (Untouchables)." This article distinctly interprets recent amendments to the Indian constitution and popular activist movements in light of the discrimination millions face.

Historical and Modern Caste System

According to historical evidence, the caste system was implemented in India around 1500 B.C.E. by Aryan invaders (Mondal 194). Aryans were a nomadic society that consisted of warriors and when this nomadic tribe entered the land that is now present day India, they

assumed power over the aboriginal communities. The social policies created by Aryans were recorded in ancient texts that serve as the foundation for the present day caste system. The earliest written references to social divisions in India appeared in the *Rig Veda*, a collection of ancient scriptures. The *Rig Veda* specifically describes the implementation of social classes that grouped people based on their form of livelihood. In addition to the *Rig Veda*, other texts titled *Samveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* contain references to social divisions. (Mandal 196). These scriptures comprise of a collection of prayers and hymns that detail different lifestyles appropriate for each caste. The texts additionally outline what behaviors, rights, and opportunities are suitable for a corresponding social class. The information provided in the hymns ultimately constructed four main social classes titled Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Sutras and Shastras (Mandal 194).

Brahmins are members of the highest caste and are believed to have originated from the head of Brahma, the creator of all things. Since brahmins are at the top of the social hierarchy, they are presented with the most opportunities while having the least amount of responsibility. Historically, Brahmins were the only members of society that were able to become priests and perform some ancient rituals. Kshatriyas are members of the second highest caste and are believed to have been created from the shoulders of Brahma. Members of the Kshatriya caste consisted of mostly warriors and kings in historic India. Vaisyas were erected from the hips of Brahma and are the third highest caste. Traditionally, Vaisyas are expected to enter a career as a trader, farmer or artisan. Lastly, Shudras are believed to have been fabricated from the feet of Brahma and assume employment as tenants or servants. Meanwhile, Dalits do not fit in any of these social groups and not considered to have been created from Brahma. This belief that Dalits were not created from a part of Brahma is why they are labeled as “polluted matter.” The

ideology surrounding Dalits is the primary cause for the appalling living conditions and jobs they are forced to undertake.

These texts and hymns essentially fabricated a social system that revolved around the division of labor. According to a popular Dalit human rights activist Ambedkar, “If the division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society then there is nothing wrong in the caste system, but the point is that the caste system is not merely division of labour, it is also a division of labourers” (Mondal 196). Fundamentally, Ambedkar states that the separation of individuals based on their jobs is essential to form skilled labors. However, the division of people into social groups which are fixed and hereditary creates a society in which one can not improve their wellbeing or livelihood. Over time, this division of people has influenced inter-caste relationships, including actions and behaviors towards one another. Generally, upper caste members exploit lower caste and outcaste members for their own benefit and ensure no social or economic mobility exists. This action of exploiting lower castes has resulted in a complex social structure that deliberately ignores the human right violations affecting the most vulnerable members of society.

Currently in present day India, the caste system has adapted to the ever changing social atmosphere. Despite the recent increase in globalization and surge of new job opportunities in India, Dalits are still forced to adhere to cultural traditions. In order to understand why the extreme division of rights and opportunities still exist in India, you must consider the importance of Hinduism in India’s society. As I have mentioned before, Hinduism and the caste system are intertwined. It comes with no surprise that strong religious beliefs among the Indian population also ensures the implementation of social stratification that ancient scriptures teach about. From the perspective a Brahmin, Dalits should not have the right, privilege or opportunity to adapt and

improve their way of life no matter what changes might occur in India's society. On the other hand, Dalits seek social reform in order to obtain equal rights but are often afraid to do so because of possible backlash from the upper castes that want to maintain the power difference. Regardless of religion or caste, social stratification is considered to be a way of life in India for all.

The film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and novel *Q & A* (2008) are both set in modern India. Regardless of the differences between the two, the current adaption of the caste system is portrayed in both. In the film, upper caste members interact with Jamil, the main character, with the intention to discourage him from continuing with the game show. An example of this is when the game show host purposely gave Jamil the wrong answer to the next question when on a commercial break (01:29:08). The show's host acted this way in an effort to sustain his supremacy over lower castes. Due to the relatedness of the plots, the novel portrays inter-caste relationships in similar ways especially with the show's host attempting to discourage Ram from becoming successful. For instance, the game show host stated "Thomas we don't know how you have managed to answer eleven question so far, but there is no way you will be able to answer the final question" (Swarup 301). Eventually Ram successfully answered all the questions but was denied his cash prize due to caste he was assigned at birth. As Ram was a member of a lower caste, the television staff did not believe he was entitled to nor had the right to be awarded the money. As a result, a police investigation was sanctioned by the game show to discredit Ram in any way. Similar to the movie, this was done with the hopes of maintaining the division of power and denying Ram social and economic mobility. Both the novel and the film adaptation effectively portray the current form of the caste system and behaviors that have been a part of India's society for centuries.

Dalit Human Right Violations

As mentioned, Dalits routinely face many forms of human rights violations as a result of the caste system. The United Nations states, “Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination” (“Human Rights”). The violations Dalits face influence physical, mental, social, and economical aspects of their daily life. From a mental perspective, children growing up in a Dalit community are denied an education. In the journal *South Asian Studies*, researchers Umbreen et. al. found that Dalits are routinely denied entry into educational facilities or were forced to sit separately in class rooms according to one’s caste (9). Obviously, denying entry into educational institutions causes Dalits to lack basic skills that could potentially allow them to obtain a more preferable career. As a result, Dalits are forced to accept a career that puts their overall health and well-being at risk. Similarly, when required to sit separately in class rooms, less attention is provided to Dalit students resulting in decreased learning and an increase in the number of students dropping out. Nonetheless, denying a population access to education ensures a continuous loop of inferior careers for generations to come.

Jobs reserved for Dalits include working as a manual scavenger, mourner, street sweeper, farm help and other low paying positions (“Caste an Eye,” 7). Manual scavenging is among one of the most degrading jobs that consists of removing human feces from public restrooms by hand. For their work Dalits are awarded dismal salaries that are barely enough to provide sustenance for an individual, let alone a family. Studies published in *Dalits of India* have shown that twenty-five percent of Dalits receive lower wages compared to non-Dalits for completing the same job (4). In addition, jobs like manual scavenging and street sweepers cause health

issues as a result from hand cleaning disease ridden feces or breathing in dust daily. Also, demographics show that Dalits are expected to live four years less than upper castes and roughly half of Dalit children face malnutrition (“Caste and Eye” 7). When sick, Dalits are denied treatment from health professionals for reasons directly caused by social stratification (“Caste an Eye” 4). The first reason being that Dalits should not be touched out of fear of oneself becoming “polluted” matter. The second reason resulting from the inability of Dalits to pay for treatment as a result of the extreme poverty they live with from terrible paying jobs. As a person concerned about human rights and the denial of dignity, I find the discrimination Dalits face inhumane. No matter what career a person may undertake, they should be awarded appropriate compensation for their time and have protection from avoidable health issues that result from one’s livelihood.

Not only do Dalits struggle to provide food and water to drink, but a high percentage are forced to live in slums. It is estimated that around 7,400,000 Dalits live in the overpopulated slums (Dalits of India 7). Slums are makeshift living spaces that are heavily overcrowded. Most of the time slums are located near polluted water sources that serve as their source for bathing, washing clothes, water and the removal of human feces. The close proximity and high pollution results in poor sanitation, which is responsible for a copious amount of health issues. Every person no matter of caste, religion, or gender should have the right to live in a sanitary environment that promotes social and economic growth.

Physically, Dalits are subject to many forms of violence in response to signs of social and economic mobility in order to maintain the division of rights and resources. The most common forms of violence include beatings, raids and destruction of property (Dalit of India 5). Dalit women are especially vulnerable to violence as they are subjected to sexual assault. Statistics show that sexual assault crimes against Dalits are higher among rural communities as landlords

exploit women who are dependent on the land (Dalit of India 3). However, Dalits do not challenge landlords because of the dependence on the land for sustenance and the inability to move because of poverty. In urban environments, forms of sexual assault against women take place for almost every reason imaginable, including revenge on the male counterpart. Aside from violence, Dalits experience physical forms of social exclusion. Again, because of the caste system's labeling of Dalits as polluted matter they are denied entrance into police stations, shops, post offices, temples, and more. It is evident that the caste system is exclusively responsible for human right violations that affect every aspect of a Dalit's life.

Correspondingly, it is apparent that human right violations are depicted throughout the film. Violence is seen in the film when Jamil has a flashback of when a mob of upper caste members raided his slum, killing his mother and making him an orphan (00:18:05). The scene opens with what looks to be a typical day in the slum and without warning a gruesome attack mounts against the lower caste men, women, and children. This is depicted by director Danny Boyle to help reveal the constant state of fear and terror associated with simply being born into the Slum. Later in the film we learn that the raid was conducted because of clashing beliefs between the poor lower caste community and upper caste mobsters. In addition, sexual assault is seen throughout the film when Latika was forced to work in a brothel by a powerful gang boss named Maman (00:55:12). The underlying purpose of this scene was to help capture the double discrimination women face due to the patriarchal society and caste system. The novel captures aspects of human rights violations when Ram is held and interrogated against his will by the police for simply answering the questions right. Additionally in the flashbacks, Ram describes his lifelong struggle to regularly find a safe place to stay, obtain food and other materials that

provide the basic needs for his survival. Without a doubt, every scene in the movie and novel can be analyzed to show a breach of basic rights that every person is entitled to as a human being.

Government Involvement and Activism

In an effort to discourage the continuation of human rights violations against Dalits the Indian government has passed constitutional amendments abolishing caste based discrimination. These amendments are in the form of provisions that ensure equal rights for all. Authors Umbreen et. al. state, “provisions have been made in the form of (1) protective measures such as prohibition of discrimination, of forced labours and untouchability, (2) welfare measures guaranteeing representation in various categories of public services, in state assemblies and in parliament and (3) development measures, providing grants-in-aid and other facilities for social and economic development” (18). In theory, these provisions should protect the rights of Dalits and ensure development to improve well-being. In reality the amendments have had little to no effect on reducing the number of human rights violations. As quoted in the article titled “Low Caste in India (Untouchables),” “Yes, change is bound to take time, but how much time is proportional to the political will of the state to implement its laws and the international human rights treaties to which it is party. Implementation of the human rights conventions and covenants also takes times, yet the Indian government has not even begun to follow through on the recommendations of the UN committees” (Umbreen et. al 15). Basically, the new constitutional amendments are not effective because of the lack of motivation from politicians and other government employees to enforce the laws. By enforcing the new laws, politicians and government officials will no longer benefit from the division of power that exists between the caste. Furthermore, you must consider that the caste system is more than the stratification of resources, it is a way of life for every caste, religion, gender, and generation. So naturally,

officials are not readily inclined to change their ideology. Regardless of new laws, no change will amount to a difference if they are not carried out by all members of society, not just the oppressed.

Due to the negligence of government officials enforcing the laws in the Indian constitution, activists are forced to step up and demand change. One influential activist that was at the forefront is Dr. Ambedkar who is a member of the Dalit community and was one of the few Dalits fortunate enough to obtain a college degree. Using his higher education degree in economics and research in political science, Ambedkar fought to fix the stratification and discrimination he and millions of others face. Ambedkar conveyed of a society which consists of equality, liberty, and fraternity and not the division of people by any means (Mondal 197). One of his most valuable contributions to social reform is his role in drafting the constitution and including equal rights for all. Although there exists a plethora of issues of implementing and enforcing the new laws created, the inclusion of equal rights was an enormous step in the battle against discrimination. In addition, Ambedkar led an ample amount of protests, including burning a copy of the *Manusmriti* (Hindu code of laws) as a sign of the unfairness against Dalits (Umbreen et. al. 17). Furthermore, Ambedkar delivered speeches that had a tremendous impact on inspiring those around him to no longer accept the discrimination they regularly face (Umbreen et. al. 13). Ambedkar is just one of many individuals who have dedicated their life to making a difference and change the social perspective around Dalits.

Similarly, the novel and film capture aspects concerning the lack of governmental will to enforce anti-discrimination laws. As mentioned before, government corruption exists when police interrogate Jamil while electrocuting him because of mere suspicions of cheating (00:05:18). If Jamil happened to be a member of the upper castes, he would have never been

questioned after winning. When analyzing the movie in entirety, power and law appears to be dictated not by the constitution but rather the corrupted officials and gangs. Likewise, the novel reveals government police officials under the command of the wealthy members of society and not bound to India's written laws. This goes to show that implementing new laws alone are not enough to change the social atmosphere regarding traditional beliefs and you must also focus on the implementation and enforcement. There is still an immense amount of social reform that is needed to ensure the equal rights that Dalits are entitled to by the Indian constitution and as humans.

Impact of Film in Society

While the novel and film are effective in portraying messages against caste based discrimination in India, the film's impact is more significant. Recently, films like *Slumdog Millionaire* challenged traditional aspects of their culture like human rights violations that result from the caste system. Author of the article titled "Tamil Cinema" and communication expert Perianayagam Jesudoss asserts, "Cinema deals with the problems to be addressed and the social issues that are of national concern, cultural goals to be proud of, and ideological possibilities to be defended and explored (5). In other words, directors incorporate all aspects of society into the story including the negative ones. In addition, films in India are known to shape popular culture as the fan base idolizes movie stars. For instance, Jesudoss states "For millions of Indians whatever they do, almost everything comes from cinema" (Jesudoss 5). Such influence proves that actions, trends and decisions of movie stars have an enormous effect on the thoughts, behaviors and actions of members in society.

More importantly, the film is able to reach all members of society including the Dalit population which experiences extremely high illiteracy rates as a result from lack of available

education. Again Jesudoss's work in communication found, "Many people especially those who are deprived, exploited, and poor in society seek to find solutions for many of their needs that spring from their uncomfortable situation in society, and cinema is an easily accessible source to which they turn for relief if not solutions" (14). Every film including *Slumdog Millionaire* can help change the perspective of upper caste members along with providing support and reassurance for lower caste members like Dalits.

As Dalits are the most exploited and discriminated caste, *Slumdog Millionaire* offers many solutions to ameliorating the violations faced. The most prominent solution is the importance of an education and positive outlook on life. By having a basic education, Dalits will be able to obtain a higher paying job in safer work environments aiding in their fight against poverty and unnecessary health risks. In addition, Jamil's actions when persevering and sarcastic behavior towards the police throughout the film helps to provide confidence and inspire viewers to have a similar positive mentality. Another solution is to surround yourself with people who will support and help you grow as an individual. In the film, Jamil's support system consists of family relationships and his fellow caste members. Jamil's brother, Salim, was a major contributor to the support system as he was the primary person in the film that looked out for the safety and well-being. Likewise, the support of the lower caste members came in the form of cheering him on in the streets and by tuning into the television program. With any challenge, a person's mentality and peer support has a profound effect on the positive outcome.

Comparative aspects and connections made to the film are more effective than the novel because the presence of visual emotions, facial expressions and setting which provide the viewer with a stronger personal connection. For example, a scene in *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) captures the emotion and shock of Jamil after he witnessed his mother being murdered during a

raid on the slum he lived in (00:18:12). During the scene, the director purposely slowed down the frames per minute to create a tension in which the viewer witnesses the exact moment Jamil's mother cried out telling her sons to run just before being hit over the head. While this was occurring, the film jumped to a shot of Jamil's face where it shows him standing motionless while trying to comprehend what is occurring. This brief pause is where the viewer establishes a connection of sorrow for Jamil as they are fixated on the traumatizing expression exhibited. Regardless of how well a novel may describe a scene, it does not compare the connection a person develops when they place a face to the story.

Conclusion

The caste system in India continues to influence society regardless of the policies in place abolishing it. Predominantly, Dalits and other lower caste members are subjected to numerous human rights violations that effects every aspect of their life. Throughout the essay I maintained the stance that caste based discrimination continues to create and sustain social conditions that deprive the Dalit community of basic human rights. Although, recent activist and government involvement has proven it is difficult to achieve the social reform that millions of Dalits desire. After researching more information about the caste system, I learned the strong connection to traditional practices of social division and division of power is to blame for the lack of enforcement of antitermination laws and the continuation of this practice. To support this claim, I analyze the origins of the caste system and its influence on the current system of social division in place. To answer my second research question regarding the current forms of human violations Dalits face, qualitative and quantitative data contained in scholarly sources are incorporated. Additionally, I reviewed qualitative research articles that help to explain the meaning and motives behind the lack of implementation of government laws that were supposed

to produce social change. To end the continuous cycle of human right violations Dalits face, social reform is needed by all members of the community regardless of caste.

Modern day infringements of rights can be found in the novel *Q & A* (2005) and the movie adaptation *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Although the film and novel have similar story lines, the film more effectively conveys information about the culture and society in India. This is a result of the visual scenes that allows viewers to connect on a more personal level. Furthermore, cinema can effectively reach all members of a society regardless of education. This allows for more information and social reform messages to influence lower and upper castes. Lastly, the film more clearly outlines human right violations lower caste members will face in different times throughout their life. To capture and display messages of social reform to the public, film has proven to be more effective medium.

The caste system is a complex system of rights and opportunities assigned to specific population of individuals. Lower caste members are forced to take on the most responsibility coupled with the least amount of rights. As a result, an estimated two hundred sixty million Dalits live in subpar conditions and are subjected to many forms of discrimination. The goal of this essay is to help bring more awareness to the issue of human right violations, which would benefit the Dalit community. As international citizens, it is our duty to ensure every person lives free of discrimination and has the same opportunities to reside in a safe environment that promotes growth. It is unacceptable that in our globalized society this form of mass human rights violations still exists. There is no better time than the present to finally abolish the inconceivable discrimination Dalits face every day of their lives.

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