

Environmental impact of Sedimentation and pollution of Ganges on rich Vaishnava culture of Panihati in West Bengal

Dr Snehal Donde* & Gaurab Saha**

*Dean Administration & Scholar, Bhaktivedanta Vidyapetha Research Centre, Goverdhan Ecovillage, Galtare, Dist. Palghar, Maharashtra. Email- drsnehaldonde@gmail.com

** Member, Vaishnava Seva Dhaam Panihati

Abstract

Panihati is historically and traditionally a remarkable holy place of Vaishnavism. Gaudiya Vaishnavism popularly known as 'Bengal Vaishnavism' originated at this place, as it is famous for pastimes of Caitanya Mahaprabhu and Nityanand Mahaprabhu. This place was enriched due to birth, contributions & holy footsteps of many great men again and again. On the bank of holy river Ganga, many temple, hermitage, garden & "Ghat" were constructed during the long past. In the history of 'eternal Hindu religion' of India, name of Panihati was very glorious but at present 'age of materialistic life', these are not being looked properly. Many localities are not even knowing about the contributions, historical values & importance of Dandamohotsavtala and Gauraga Ghat which were once at the peak of its glory & yet glorious, not only for Bengal but also for rest of India and to some extent at many places of the world as Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu visited Panihati and eternally resides here. Therefore, this paper explains the historical spiritual and cultural importance of the place and the present condition. Also, as religion and the environment have been two subjects that have continually crossed paths, this paper attempts to explore the relationship of religion and the environment with ethnographic approach and unfolds the implications of sedimentation and pollution of river Ganges on the religious sentiments of the devotees and worshippers practicing Vaishnavism. Finally, the study concludes with suggesting West Bengal Government for desilting of Ganges and separate sewer and river channels along with the restoration of Dandamahotsavtala and Gauragna Ghat and declaring these rich places of Vaishnavism in Panihati as pilgrimage heritage sites. This study is intended to build social capital and for the benefits of cultural and heritage tourism.

Key words: Vaishnavism, Panihati, Environmental impact, Ganges, heritage.

Introduction

The village Panihati, situated 10 miles north of Kolkata, on the bank of the river Ganges, once used to be a blooming centre of trade and commerce. Infact, the very name 'Panihati' comes from the very word, Pannyahati (pannya-commodity, hati-market). The river Ganges also played a crucial role in boosting the trade as it served as a navigable waterway on which goods could be transported by boat from Panihati to various places and vice-versa.

Material prosperity is not everlasting. It is subject to the onslaught of time and in case of Panihati, it was no exception. But spiritual glory and prosperity is eternal and ever-fresh and there is no comparison to the immense spiritual fortune of Panihati. There are many sites of pilgrimage located at the bank of the sacred Ganges. But the soil of Panihati has been kissed not just by the sacred water of the Ganges but also by the butter-soft, pink soles of the divine lotus feet of the Supreme Personality of Godhead which are considered to be the source of the river Ganges according to Srimad Bhagavatam, the essence of all Vedic scriptures. That Supreme Personality of Godhead is Caitanya Mahaprabhu whom the Vedic scriptures recognize as non-different from Lord Narayana or Lord Krishna and whose divine eternal presence in Panihati has elevated the spiritual fortune of Panihati to an unparalleled position.

Historical spiritual and cultural richness of Panihati

Caitanya Mahaprabhu who is hailed by Indian history as a revolutionary medieval saint came to Panihati twice- once in the year 1514 A.D. (on the Krishna dwadashi day of the month of Ashwin) on His way to Jagannath Puri and another time in 1515 A.D. (on the day of Krishna-ekadashi of the month of Phalgun) while travelling to Vrindavan from Jagannath Puri via Bengal. The ferry ghat in Panihati where Caitanya Mahaprabhu arrived is known as 'Gauranga ghat'. Fortunately, our ISKCON Panihati temple is situated write next to this ghat. Caitanya Mahaprabhu came to the house of Raghav Pandit (popularly known as Raghav Bhavan), his dear most associate.

Caitanya Mahaprabhu was undoubtedly a revolutionary who brought about a revolution in consciousness by initiating the sankirtana movement or congregational chanting of the holy name of Lord Krishna. Universal oneness centred around the spiritual consciousness that every living being, irrespective of his material designations like caste, creed, race, religion, nationality etc. is ultimately a part and parcel of the Supreme Being, Krishna was what His movement promoted and it was massively and heartily received by people from all corners of India. This sankirtana movement, popularly known as the Bhakti movement finds a prominent place in the pages of history but where was the epicentre of this movement that was the harbinger of a massive social revolution and cultural renaissance, it was in Panihati.

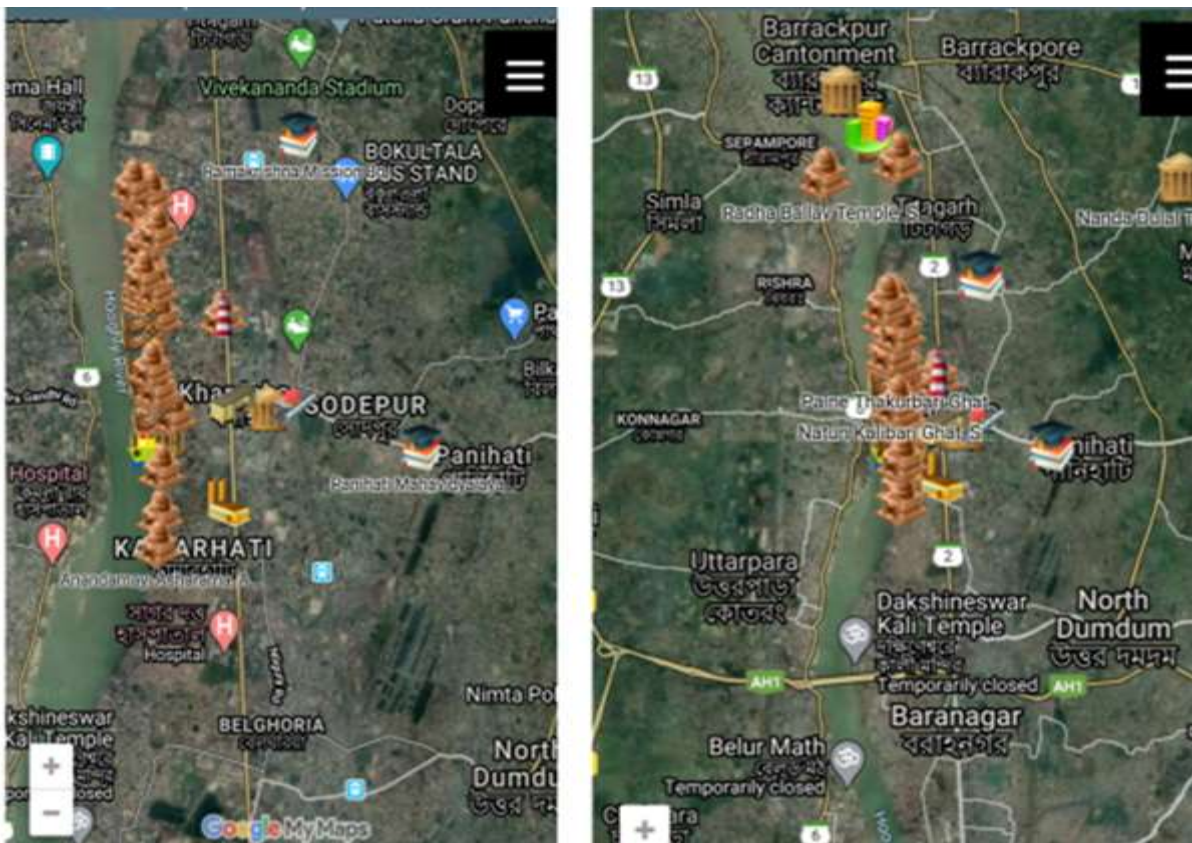


Fig: Google Map of the Ghats and Temples on the banks of Hoogly river at Panihati region

When Caitanya Mahaprabhu was residing in Jagannath Puri, the sankirtana movement in Bengal came to a standstill because of neglect. As his very close friend and associate Nityananda prabhu was visiting him in Jagannath Puri and was a most reliable sankirtana commander He ordered him to go back to Bengal to revive the movement there. Nityananda prabhu brought to Bengal a deluge of ecstatic love for Krishna and made everyone, even the thieves, dacoits and countless fallen souls plunge into the tsunami of Harinam sankirtana. He first came to Panihati and made Raghav Bhavan, the house of Raghav Pandit to be the epicentre of this great revolution. For three months, he stayed in Panihati, performing non-stop sankirtana, producing waves of incomparable spiritual ecstasy which made the residents of Panihati abandon eating and sleeping and get totally immersed in the nectar of the holy name of Krishna. The actual source of the purifying river, Ganges is the spiritual kingdom of the Lord, Vaikuntha and the source of the purifying river of Harinam sankirtana which gradually flowed to every corner of India and the world. Panihati became non-different from Vaikuntha, the literal meaning of which is a state, free from all kinds of material anxieties. However, Caitanya Mahaprabhu, even though being a revolutionary was not just an ordinary saint, a human made of flesh and blood. He is undoubtedly the Supreme Lord, Narayan. It has been clearly predicted in Srimad Bhagavatam (11.5.32), the foremost among the Vedic scriptures that in Kali Yuga, the Supreme Personality of Godhead will descend, not with a blackish complexion (Caitanya Mahaprabhu was golden-complexioned) and being accompanied by His associates, servants, confidential companions, He (in the disguise of a devotee) will inaugurate the sankirtana movement which will be appreciated and participated only by the intelligent persons. This leaves no doubt about the divinity of Caitanya Mahaprabhu who Himself declared, ‘raghav bhavane ami thakiba sarvada’

or 'I will eternally reside in Panihati at the house of Raghava Pandit'. Many such inexplicable pastimes have occurred in Panihati which goes on to prove that Caitanya Mahaprabhu was not just a historical personality but a divine personality. One such wonderful pastime is associated with Raghav Pandit. When Raghav Pandit used to cook foodstuffs and offer them to his worship able Deity, Sri Sri Radha Madanmohan, he would also make nice arrangements for separately offering foodstuffs to Caitanya Mahaprabhu and it is stated in Caitanya Caritamrita, Antya lila 6.113, the biography of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, authored by the famous devotee, Srila Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami, that EVERYDAY, Caitanya Mahaprabhu, being attracted by the devotion of Raghav Pandit would come and accept that offering, even though Mahaprabhu would not be physically present in Panihati. This shows that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is the Supreme Personality of Godhead whose presence is not limited by space and time. Regarding this, it is stated in Caitanya Caritamrita Antya lila 6.125 that the Supreme Personality of Godhead is all-pervasive and therefore he resides everywhere and more specifically in Caitanya Caritamrita Antya lila 6.124 that the Supreme Personality of Godhead resides either in the heart or in the HOME of the devotee and this fact is sometimes hidden (in case of the faithless) and sometimes manifest (in case of the devotees). Panihati is thus the eternal resting place of BHAGAVAN Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu who always loved to be in the house of His dearmost devotee, Raghav Pandit and it is thus as good as Vrindavan, the eternal residence of Lord Krishna and Vaikuntha, the eternal residence of Lord Narayan. Such immense is the spiritual glory of this place.



Panihati a place of Religious pastimes of Sri Chaitanya and Nityananda, as it is here where Netai and Gour once dwelled.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had once quoted:
It is here in four places, where I dwell,
In the kitchen of Sri Shachi Maa,
In the dance of Sri Nityananda,
In the courtyard of Sribas,
In the house of Raghav

Shri Ramkrishna Paramansha also visited and participated in the chida mela/Danda Utsav
Ravindranath Tagore- "My reminiscences" mention glimpse and flow of Ganga influenced in 11age for creative imaginations and life turned. Vivekanad, Gandhi, Subhash Bose.. all life influenced by this place

Because of holy footsteps of Shri Chaitanna, Nityananda and subsequent movement, 'it is a great pilgrim centre of the Vaishnavas. There are the famous Asvattha and Bat trees on the bank of the river where Sri Chaitanya and Nityananda supposedly had rested for some time. The place has been referred to in different Vaishnava books, namely, Chityanya Mangal, Chaitanya Bhagavat, Chaitanya Charitamrita, Bhakti Ratnakar, Chaitanya Chandrodaya (drama), Bansi Bistar by Nityananda, 5 Vaishnava Namdeva by Debaki Nanda and Vaishnava Achar Daran.'

Visits of Mahapurushas in Panihati

The glory of this has attracted many great thinkers, social reformers and revolutionaries like a magnet. The ideal of universal oneness, that what was the cornerstone of Mahaprabhu's sankirtana movement had acted as a source of inspiration behind the foundation of Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932 by Mahatma Gandhi who paid visit to Panihati several times and acknowledged the great spiritual fortune of Panihati by saying, "This land has been sanctified by the feet of Caitanya", during the inauguration of Khadi Pratisthan at Sodepur on 2.1.1927. The glorious life story of Mahaprabhu also left a deep and an indelible impact in the mind of the great Indian freedom fighter, Subhas Chandra Bose who wrote in one of his letters to his mother, Prabhuavati Devi, "When Vaishnavism in Bengal came to the point of extinction, the great Vasihnavacharya, Advaita Acharya prayed to the Lord to descend and protect religion. Then the Lord descended as Caitanya which shows that the mercy of the Lord is without any beginning and without any end and His mercy can be experienced by His devotees even amidst the destructive dance of sinful activities. His unfailing mercy gives us hope that even amidst this darkness where we are at the present, we can still dream of a bright future, ruled by truth, justice and love as the Lord incarnates again and again whenever injustice prevails." It was his strong faith in the divinity of Caitanya and his dream of a bright future that motivated him to leave Congress in 1939, form his own party, Forward Block and later the Indian National Army to liberate India from the British domination. This historic decision to leave Congress was taken by Bose on the very soil of Panihati during his meeting with Gandhiji at Sodepur Khadi Ashram. It was the touch of the sacred soil Panihati, which witnessed the birth of greatest ever revolution of consciousness in the form of Harinam sankirtana that inspired Bose to embark upon this revolutionary decision.

The famous Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, in whose poem, appreciation of nature is a notable feature, was deeply attracted towards the aesthetic beauty of Panihati. There is a garden house in Panihati where Tagore visited in his boyhood to avoid an epidemic of Dengu fever, then prevailing in Calcutta. He came to Panihati thrice and Panihati has a special place in his life as depicted by Tagore himself in his book, Jivan Smriti or My reminiscences.

The heartbeat of this place is the historic cida dadhi festival or the festival of chipped rice and yogurt which was inaugurated by Nityananda prabhu to bestow His mercy upon Raghunath Das Goswami, one of the six goswamis of Vrindavan (who were devotional teachers from the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of Vedic religion who are known for their philosophical presentations of the teachings of Caitanya Mahaprabhu who directly empowered them for this mammoth task). Raghunath Das Goswami was the son of a wealthy landlord in Saptagram. But material opulence failed to attract his interest and attention and his innermost irresistible desire was to surrender himself to the lotus feet of Mahaprabhu and dedicate his entire life to His service. He tried to run away from his home to attain the feet of Mahaprabhu many times but each time, he failed. Finally, when he came to Panihati, he pleased Nityananda prabhu by organizing the cida dadhi mahotsava and feeding Nityananda prabhu and His associates, chipped rice and yogurt. By the mercy of Nityananda prabhu, Raghunatha's desire was finally fulfilled. The banyan tree at

the bank of the Ganges which is more than 500 years old still stands as a witness to this great historic festival which was attended by countless people irrespective of caste and creed. The festival is held even to this day with pomp and grandeur and devotees from far off places attend this festival to partake of the mercy of Nityananda prabhu. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa visited Panihati twice to attend this festival in 1858 and 1885. When he came in 1885, he was accompanied by Swami Vivekananda (who was Narendranath Dutta at that time) and his other disciples. The house of Mani Sen where he stayed during his visit in Panihati is still existing at Panihati.

His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder-Acharya of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) also visited this place and his plan was to develop an ISKCON centre in Panihati. About this place, he said, "This centre will be very important and thousands of people will come because it is approachable by the river highway". Finally, a centre of ISKCON has been developed in this place and ISKCON is doing its best to preserve and promote massive awareness about the spiritual and cultural heritage of Panihati.

Environmental implications and present status

The richness of Vaishnava culture rituals and traditions are affected due to the anthropological, environmental and ecological consequences which has impacted the place adversely. Interaction with the people and few NGO's in the region revealed that sedimentation caused in Ganga is due to the commissioning of the Farakka Barage dam in 1972 in the upstream, which is frequently causing bank erosions on the stretch of river. As Panihati is established on the bank of Hoogly river, having chain of more than 34 Ghats and temples is abundantly affected. Due to frequent bank erosion and pollution of Ganges by release of open drainage water religious sentiments of general public and devotees is diminishing. As described in Caitanya Caritamrita in early 10th century Chira Mahotsav festival was happening in the Panihatti by the people standing in the Ganga river and people use to stand in water for the rituals. This practice is now confined to standing on the bank and sprinkling only few drops of water over the head. It is known that ecology and rituals were substantiating for each other, but presently the situation is such that environmental restoration is ruled out as siltation has affected the flow of Ganges and drainage water has polluted her beyond repair. Today situation is such that locals don't know about Chira Mahotsav as it is forgotten. The area near Gaur Nitai Temple at Raghav Bhavan at 37 Gaurang road near Panihati Ferry ghat at Mahotsav tala is all over spilled by garbage and ignorance of people is evident by the drainage water flowing into the Ganges. Many antisocial elements weed in the holy land and trying to impede the noble endeavour to restore the ethos of the place. Health risk is also significantly prominent by the water borne diseases like diarrhoea, typhoid and others including skin diseases. Encroachments in the river land and construction of three four storied builds on it is adding pressure on the land causing regular erosions. The impact of modernity is evident in and around the Ghats and Temples of Panihati and sukhchar.

In the upstream area of Ganges, people in Dhulian and Parlalpur in Malda-Murshidabad region have shown the massive erosion issues across the place. Jahiruddin,, a local secondary school teacher, while

showing the Radha Krishna temple which is on the verge of submerging any time, expressed that God is also not spared due to the human unending desires and unjust behavior. He showed advantages taken of the erosion situation by the contractors in construction of embankments to stop erosion. Instead of concrete porcupines (Tripod structures of concrete made to stop sedimentation), bamboo porcupines are released from small boats on the erosion sites. This way crores of public fund is wasted and people are displaced due to erosion.

Radhapada Das, an ISKCON Devotee at Panihati emotionally expressed that, embracing all people equally was a revolutionary movement by Caitanya Mahaprabhu. He started from this place Chira Mahotsav to bring all caste creed people together at one place, this makes the place of high spiritual value and this needs to be maintained. He continued to show the place at Gauranga Ghat where lotus feet of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu touched the ghat and says that Lord Chaitanya eternally resides here. Showing the garbage all over at the same place he was tearful. Open drains being released in Ganges, erosion of river banks, encroachments on river land and construction of buildings by deforestation he explained how these situations have loosened the soil to an extent that there is a pressure on land which may cause devastations in near future by floods. Also lack of solid waste management and the pollution of place by the garbage and open drain releasing in Ganges next to the temple is affecting seriously the sentiments of the local people.

Fig: Present status of garbage dumping and water pollution at Gaurang Ghat & Mahotsavtala





Raghav Bhavan, Mahotsav Tala, Gaur Nitai Temple are all places of aesthetics with nature. This is a place of Mahapurushas which could have been maintained and presented with natural beauty of ecologically flowing Ganga, which once influenced their lives, decisions and created beautiful poems, is opinion of Dr Shekhar Sheth, an expert working for making the place as a heritage site. He mentions that Mahatma Gandhi almost visited this place 25 times and also Jaliawala massacre was discussed here by Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose. Panihati is important as it is also called 'Purva Kashi' and spiritually and geographically it is a second Varanasi. His views is that Government must take serious note of the richness of this place and take steps to declare Panihati city as a heritage place.

Arpan Ganguly, a devotee of Iskcon temple emphasises that this Panihati Raghav Bhavan must be declared a pilgrimage tourism place to highlight Panihati-Khardah. The natural beauty of the place with greenery and clean river ghats must be maintained.

Panihati municipality releasing drainage water and garbage in Ganga Ghat near water pumping station



As all the existing status of solid waste and drainage release in Ganges in Panihati was explained to Dr Kalyan Rudra, Chairman, West Bengal Pollution Control Board, he informed that the government has already taken serious note of the situation and have made plans. They have started working on the drainage issues on the basis of National Green Tribunal (NGT) directives, wherein they have identified 56 spots of drainage nallahs polluting Ganga and diversions are being worked out so that waste water cannot reach

the river. A Cleaning drive shall be worked out with the locals and display boards shall be installed with do's and don'ts.

The degrading condition of the rich heritage of Panihati due anthropological activities which includes antisocial elements disturbing the spiritual and cultural ethos of the area, growing unlawful encroachments, garbage dumping and drainage pollution, despite of Panihati being the biggest Municipal Corporation in West Bengal, is a matter of concern. Hence the study recommends to West Bengal Heritage Commission to declare this place as heritage to revive the overall scenario and Urban Development authorities to take corrective measures, so as to preserve the Vaishnava culture which originated in Panihati.

Recommendations

Government is suggested to declare Danda Mhaotsavtala and Gauranga Ghat as heritage in Panihati related to Lord Caitanya's pastimes and visits

Government is suggested to promote religious tourism within the Caitanya circuit and ensure infrastructural development of the place

For declaring the heritage status and pilgrimage tourism for Panihati Ghats temples and Ashrams, following parameters of historic aesthetics and glorious spiritual richness of the place shall be considered;

- Mohotsav tala and Gauranga Ghat -famous for the footsteps of Caitanya Mahaprabhu and Nityanand Prabhu
- Focus on religious map circuit- Panihati purna bhoomi under cluster religious places is unique to be declared under pilgrimage tourism, as across the nation and around the world this place is adored by devotees. The best way for reaching this place is through river traffic along the Ganges
- Panihati is a religious place of Caitanya Mahaprabhu and Nityanand Prabhu pastimes – Nitai Gour dwelled here.
- Chaitanya Mahaprabhu resides eternally -Gaudiya Vaishnavism culture (Bengal Vaishnavism) is pioneering and being practiced since ages
- 24 Parganas Gazette book mention that on Gauranga Ghat Panihati Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Nityanand Prabhu used to come frequently 500 years ago.
- First time in this place a revolutionary act of embracing all people equally (of various caste, creed, race) was performed by Chaitanya Prabhu by organizing Chira Dahi Mahotsav- Caitanya movement, which still continues and attracts many people across the globe to participate
- Spiritually and geographically Panihati is like second Varanasi- called Purva Kashi due to chain of ghats and temples along the Ganges

- Place of Mahapurush/Peace leaders as location of Panihati Ghats and temples on the Bank of Ganges along with its religious and spiritual history influenced their lives to perform revolutionary work and take decisions- Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Nityanad Mahaprabhu, Ramkrishna Paramahansa, Ravindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekanad, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Bose, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, among others visited the palce
- Chain of Ghats and Temples at one place- 34 Ghats and Temples
- Cultural renaissance can be gained by Philosophical and Sociological perspectives of religious community. Panihati region in Kolkata has excellent legacy of religious views and perspectives, practices and sentiments associated with Ganges
- Monisen Thalurbari, Raghav Bhavan, Mahotsav Tala, Girivala Thakur Bari (Rani Rasmoni Family), Mohindranath Chaterjee Thakur Bari (Govind Dutta, Chief kirtaniya of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Gaur Nitai temple ISKCON and many important Ashrams at Panihati to be considered inclusively for the grade of heritage place.
- International recognitions- Stone from Panihati Gaur Nitai Temple is kept in Hall of fame in Florida and temple in Georgia named as Panihati temple, Saint Lewis Vedant website in US showcase Monisen Thakur Bari.

Finally, it is also suggested that local public must make efforts to take guardianship for maintaining the religious and cultural ambience of the place and restore the ecological and environmental flow of river Ganges along with bringing back sacredness, sanctity and sentiments of devotees, pilgrims, and others towards the rich Vaishnava culture of Panihati.

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