



Challenging Intersectional Oppressions of Caste, Class, Capitalism, and Patriarchy: Women in Naxalite Movement.

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Abstract: This paper is divided into two sections, the first part unveils the underlying structure of the agrarian social system from the pre-colonial to the contemporary state, it traces the mode of production and the forces of production that constitute the social relation of production and bring out the complexities the present day capitalist agrarian structure is engulfed, with their relation to land, the caste class dynamics, the social hierarchy of people participating in the form of production. The second part is focused around women as a significant contributor in the agrarian social system with their invisibility yet their efforts in creating an egalitarian social structure against the exploitative capitalism while negotiating their space and share in land, fights with caste system and social subjugation through the patriarchy, by partaking in the Naxalite movement which promised them a just social order.

Keywords: caste, class, land reform, naxal, Naxalite, movement, agrarian, justice.

Introduction

The Indian agricultural system prior to India's independence was largely feudal, with various types of landlords in control of the land. These included zamindars, talukdars, khots, malguzars, and jotedars. In some regions, tenants were proto-capitalist, while in others they were more feudal and sublet the land to sharecroppers. Even in ryotwari areas where recognized 'ryots' were those with a cultivating tradition, non-cultivating landlords still controlled the majority of the land, often through purchasing or winning rights over it due to peasant indebtedness. The regions where ryots relied heavily on bonded labour, anti-feudal movements emerged through peasant revolts and anti-caste movements led by Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar, targeting landlords and moneylenders. Despite these efforts, in the post-independence India the focus was centred on capitalist development with little or no attention to the restructuring of agrarian social structure. Though the government recognized the need for anti-feudal land reforms and rural market expansion, but the emphasis was on



heavy industry, public sectors, and infrastructure, with additional focus on land reforms and various village development programs in the five-year plans. Though the Zamindari Abolition Acts and Tenancy Acts was passed in the 1950s it did not succeed in providing land to the landless or land-poor in India. Instead, they facilitated the rise of a new class of capitalist farmers made up of ex-tenants and rich peasants. The Land Ceiling Acts, implemented from 1961 onwards, was designed to provide land to the landless and challenge the concept of land property. However, they had minimal impact, and only a small amount of cultivated land was distributed by 1977.

The New India was ambitiously plan around heavy industry, dam-building, and development of the small-scale agricultural sector. The nationalization of banks in 1969 channelled more credit to the countryside, and efforts such as education, co-operative credit societies, land development banks, and agricultural universities contributed to the new kulak class's increasing productivity and larger share of government resources. These developments were uneven across India, with the south and western regions showing a clearer prevalence of capitalist relations of production. However, the east, northeast, and central regions remained backward with significant semi-feudal relations of production. Additionally, there were significant differences within regions, states, and districts.

Commercialisation of rural economy

Agricultural productivity was gauged by indicators, including the percentage of rural families relying on wages as their primary or secondary income. Early 1960s studies by the Reserve Bank found that more than half of rural households depended on wages, and estimated that this number has risen to approximately 65 percent. Additionally, in the early 1960s, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture estimated that roughly 45-47 percent of crop production was sold on the market, with the majority sold by producers and the remainder sold by landlords or moneylenders (Rastyanniikov, 1975). A study by Indradeep Sinha (1980) presents that almost all commercial crops and 40-60 percent of food crops during the last 30 years, are sold in the market as commodities. There has also been significant growth in the use of capital in agriculture, with modern inputs such as fertilisers, tractors, and irrigation pumps being increasingly adopted while replacing the wooden plough by iron plough with its use doubled from 1961 to 1971 and discouraging the use of animal drawn cart [CMIE, 1979] Agriculture



now uses more capital inputs, most of which come from the state and cooperative sectors, increasing its reliance on the global market. An obvious illustration of this is the rise in fertiliser production, which went from 39,000 tonnes in 1951–1952 to 3,490,000 tonnes in 1979–1980, but imports jumped from 52,000 tonnes to 2,300,000 tonnes in the same time frame. The value of imports increased from Rs 5 crore to Rs 600 crore, even though their share of total use dropped from 57% to 40%. The amount of crude oil imported needed to produce fertiliser is not included in these numbers. Although India's reliance on foreign fertilisers for food production has decreased, the country still needs food (The Economic Times, March 4, 1980; CMIE, 1979).

The rise of rural elite

The nature of the rural elite has changed significantly as a result of the expansion of productive forces in India's agriculture, particularly in terms of class relations. Until the "green revolution," the replication of production methods was independent of the market; however, this is no longer the case with labour force reproduction. But with the advent of contemporary inputs, easier access to credit, and outside funding sources, wealthy farmers' means of production are now mostly supplied by the market and contemporary industry. As a result, capitalist farmers have come to dominate the agricultural industry, using labour force abuses to keep control of the means of production. More than 50% of the rural population in India relies on wages for their survival, with all farmers being obligated to sell their produce in the market to some degree. The majority of the means of production are manufactured industrially, obtained through the market, and controlled by individuals who benefit from the exploitation of labour. These conditions contribute to the predominantly capitalist nature of agriculture in India.

The rural elite has thus undergone a dramatic transformation as a result of the capitalist expansion of agricultural forces, with wealthy farmers now obtaining their means of production mostly from the market, contemporary industry, and the government. The market now determines how labour is reproduced, but land is still the most important component. Capitalist farmers are now the dominating class in agriculture, having formerly been predominantly landlords. The emergence of new institutions, such as the educational institutions, panchayat raj, credit co-operative societies, mahila mandals, and other "village



development" organisations, played a crucial role in the rise of the emerging elite class by allowing them to assert their dominance over the rural population, who were becoming more proletarianized and restless. This led to the establishment of a new form of political hegemony.

Weakening of tenancy

The tenancy declined significantly, with leased-in land decreasing from 35.7% of the total in 1950-51 to 9.25% in 1971-72. The concept of tenancy was transformed into capitalist tenancy, in which wealthy and middle-class farmers who possess the resources to cultivate land economically were leased the land. In 1971, reverse tenancy was used as a means of increasing land concentration, with the richest 15% of households possessing around 24% of the leased land and the poorest 50% of households holding just about 40%. As per the National Sample Survey (NSS) data, the percentage of land leased-in saw a decline from 35.7% in 1950-51 to 9.25% in 1971-72, with the most substantial decrease observed before 1961-62, a period marked by the implementation of the Zamindari Abolition and Tenancy Act (Joshi, 1981).

Land concentration and capitalist farmers

Chatterjee and Mukerji (1989) delve into the land concentration and capitalist farmers, point out to the ownership and production relationships of the 90% of land that is not occupied by tenant farmers. While some activists and theorists classify large farmers who don't work on their own land as landlords and their hired labourers as bonded labourers, Chatterjee and Mukerji propose that landowners who gain surplus value from hired labourers should be considered capitalists. The above Scholarships highlights that even though the most repressed labourers might be in a state of "bondage," their primary motivation for acquiescing to it is economic, since selling labour power is prevalent in India. Furthermore, it is argued by the authors that macro-level data sources such as the Agricultural Census, National Sample Surveys, All-India Debt and Investment Surveys, and Rural Labour Enquiries are biased. 1. The biases result in a miscalculation of the riches and influence of the affluent, an exaggerated perception of the quantity and standing of middle-class farmers, and an undervaluation of proletarianization. The data on operational holdings reveals that the top 15% of holdings control approximately 60% of the land, while the top 4% control 31%. However, this data is considered to be an underestimation due to the fact that the Census defines "operational holdings" as land operated as a technical unit, whether owned or rented, by a single individual.



The authors contend that the family should be considered as the true unit of land operation.

Class structure of rural India

Pathak (1977) highlights the existence of notable disparities within the rural Indian capitalist class. It is observed that the top 4% of agricultural holdings control 31% of the land area, while the top 2.2% of households operate on 23% of the land area. Furthermore, the top 5% of all households possess a significant 47.21% of the total assets, with the top 1% alone holding 22.96% of the total assets. The degree of inequality is challenging to estimate accurately, but it is clear that even the top fractions of a percentage of households have a high degree of inequality, likely merging into the urban and industrial bourgeoisie. Pathak (1977) further suggests that the smaller capitalist farmers in India have a relatively low standard of living compared to the world average, and their lives are insecure and unstable due to fluctuating price and market conditions and the vagaries of weather, along with their social traditions. Although urban and foreign observers often label them as "peasants," these farmers actively engage in militant agitations, such as the recent "farmers' movements," advocating for higher prices. This active participation positions them as a noteworthy exploiting class in India, as mentioned in the text. According to Pathak (1977), the distinction between small and big capitalist farmers does not constitute an essential class difference. While the "rich peasant" segment is crucial in analysing India's rural capitalists, it is equally important to recognize the substantial inequality within the capitalist class. Harriss (1982) reported that in rural India, there is a significant degree of inequality, with the top 10-15% of families controlling 57-62% of the total land and the top 15% controlling about 75%. The affluent farmers exhibit a higher concentration of marketed produce compared to poorer families, as they sell at least twice the amount of their total produce (Rastyannik-ey, 1975). The Agricultural Income Distribution Survey (AIDIS) reveals that in 1971-72, 6% of all capital expenditure and 12% of gross capital formation of rural households were allocated to non-farm businesses. Moreover, the concentration of total assets, encompassing land value, buildings, animals, farm machinery, non-agricultural assets, and hidden non-landed assets, is even more pronounced. The rural elite is a blend of small business owners, merchants, landlords, white-collar employees, and capitalist farmers (Harriss, 1982). These prosperous farmers also invest in small transportation companies, tea shops, small flour mills, oil mills, brick kilns, and other enterprises. They



actively participate in trade, compete with merchant classes/castes, and establish cooperative sugar factories.

Caste dominance in rural structure

A comprehensive examination of social class in rural India necessitates the inclusion of caste dynamics. The historical framework of Indian feudalism was intricately intertwined with the caste system, a phenomenon that continues to exert significant influence and potency in contemporary society (Gupta, 2001). The relationship between caste and class persisted during colonial control, with middle and lower castes mostly consisting of labourers and upper castes typically consisting of landowners, moneylender-merchants, officials, and professionals. But this outdated association between caste and class has been destroyed by the growth of capitalist agriculture in India, creating a new and more intricate link between the two. The vast majority of affluent individuals residing in rural areas today, especially in states with a more capitalistic orientation, belong to the shudra or middle-caste category. These individuals continue to associate themselves with terms such as kisan or shetkari ('peasants') or bahujan samaj ('majority community'), and their cultural practices are rooted in a history of challenging the authority of high-caste individuals and landlords, while also embracing a strong sense of caste identity. (Gupta, 2001). As Beteille aptly points out, in practice there has been regional classification that divides rural populations into roughly four or five major socioeconomic groups depending on their location in the production system. (Beteille, 1974: 126). In Bengal they are mostly zamindar-jotedar-bardadar-khetmazhur (wealthy peasants who own land/, this class excludes artisans and merchants. (Sivkumar, 1978; Gough, 1977; Mencher, 1928) mirasdars or kaniyachikars (landlords) In - paykaries (tenants) - functionaries and artisans - adimays and padials (serfs and field slaves) traders are somewhat outside this hierarchy. In Bihar, Harcourt observes a social structure that closely resembles the one found in Bengal. This structure includes the ashraf (high caste landowners), bakal (village merchants), pawania (village artisans), jotiya (small-scale farmers) who work on their own land, a group that is sometimes further divided into affluent farmers and labourers or sharecroppers, as well as "a group of landless labourers from the lower castes, commonly referred to by the name of the most populous labor caste at the local level." (Harcourt, 1977: 324-325; Singh, 1978; Thorner, 1976). There were four castes in Maharashtra: the Upari or Mehman (a Hindu caste that farmed outside the village), the Kulwadi (a non-dominant line), the Rayats (the Patil or dominant line



of chiefs), and the Balutedar (all artisan castes, generally the lowest untouchable working classes; the Mahars and Mangs were also classified separately, as in Bihar).

The rural working class is highly divided by caste. Data from the Rural Labour Inquiry indicates that the lowest section of agricultural labour households is predominantly made up of dalits (Scheduled Castes), advasis (Scheduled Tribes), and others. The category of "others" includes Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of artisan and kisan caste background, many of whom are also agricultural labourers. On an all-India basis, a little over half of agricultural labourers belong to the "other" category, and this proportion is even higher in the southern and western states where proletarianization and loss of land by ex-peasants is most severe. This disproves the assumption that agricultural labourers are primarily dalits and advasis, which is only true in Punjab and Haryana, where there is also an influx of UP-Bihar caste Hindu labourers (Gupta, 2001). Class and caste are not completely correlated anymore, although economic differentiation has impacted nearly every caste. Nevertheless, this differentiation is experienced in varying degrees among different castes. Dalits, advasis, artisan-service castes, low castes, and minority groups like Muslims and Christians continue to be predominantly proletarianized. On the other hand, middle-level kisan castes exhibit the highest level of class differentiation, encompassing capitalist farmers, middle peasants, and landless agricultural labourers. It is worth noting that even dominant clans, such as the "patil" lineage of a village, may have members who work as agricultural labourers (Gupta, 2001).

Kumar (1982) argues that the influence of caste on class conflict in India is twofold. In rural regions, caste serves to strengthen class distinctions, intensifying class conflict by fostering a market-like dynamic between farmer employers and agricultural labourers, which is further fuelled by caste biases. However, the historical and cultural heritage of dalits, advasis, and low-caste non-Brahman labourers can also be a potent tool against oppression, potentially uniting all working classes in the struggle against caste discrimination and its repressive culture if integrated into the broader class struggle. According to Jaffrelot (1981), capitalist farmers can utilize India's existing class and caste systems to divide the rural semi-proletariat and target the most militant Dalit and Adivasi communities. The ongoing fight of Dalit and low-caste workers in Bhojpur under Naxalite leadership, recent increases in protests by sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, spontaneous strikes by rural labourers in Ahmednagar and other regions, locally organized movements in Dhule, and various other unreported clashes among



agricultural labourers, other rural workers, and poor and middle peasants, however, indicate a prolonged period of intense and intricate class struggle.

PART II

The agricultural sector is of utmost importance in India, being the largest sector of economic activity, comprising of the unorganized sector it houses the largest segment of workers, comprising 74.6 million people (Census,1991). It further identifies 110.7 million cultivators, with half belonging to the small and marginal farmers category, other engage in activities related to livestock, forestry, fishing, orchards, and allied activities. Small and marginal farmers supplement their limited incomes by working as agricultural labourers during their free time or in times of difficulty. Feminisation of agriculture is reflected in the 1991 Census Reporting 75% of the rural female population in India as small and marginal farmers and landless agricultural labourers. Interestingly, this statistic remains same 2011. The phenomenon of the feminization of agriculture, which is observed in many developing countries, is also evident in rural India. The trend of female main workers taking over the roles traditionally held by male main workers in the rural sector seems to be underway, although the reported extent of this phenomenon has been minimal. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that women who work in family farms and family enterprises are classified as marginal workers. Additionally, men's seasonal migration in search of work may leave women in charge of agricultural management, but their status as main workers may not be acknowledged. According to the Census 2001 data, 39% of workers in farming are women, which includes both cultivators and agricultural labourers. Furthermore, 23% of workers in other categories, such as livestock and fisheries, were women. Women make up about 33% of cultivators and 47% of agricultural labourers, although there is no distinction between main and marginal workers. Unfortunately, there is no comparable data for 1991 to determine whether there has been an increase in the feminization of agriculture over the decade. If female workers in livestock, fisheries, and forestry-related activities are also included, the percentage of female workers in agriculture is likely to increase. The scarcity of work opportunities has failed to match the growing demand for employment, particularly in the rural sector, and this has led to an increase in the marginal workforce. As a result of poverty, individuals accept even marginal work instead of being unemployed. Over the last decade, both urban and rural areas have seen a rise in the number of marginal workers, particularly in rural areas. Female



marginal workers can be found in both crop and livestock enterprises, typically family enterprises and agricultural labour. Unfortunately, there is no data on their exact distribution. In the rural workforce, the proportion of marginal workers has risen from 10.74 percent to 26.07 percent, while the share of main workers has decreased from 89.26 percent to 76.93 percent. The situation is even more concerning in terms of the size of the marginal workforce, which has increased from 26.73 million in 1991 to 80.98 million in 2001. The available data on districts in India indicates that approximately 46% of the districts have more female agricultural labourers than male, with some districts having more than 60% of their agricultural labour force composed of women. Conversely, only 8.7% of the districts have more than half of their cultivators identified as women. These gender disparities are particularly pronounced in economically disadvantaged districts, where female agricultural labourers make up more than 40% of the workforce in 83.7% of the districts chosen for food-for-work programs and employment guarantee schemes. In addition, female cultivators make up over 40% of all cultivators in 29% of the backward districts. Therefore, in economically disadvantaged areas of India, women have a greater representation in agriculture as both cultivators and labourers than the national average. Depressed wages contribute to poverty, and the wage differential between men and women further decreases women's economic stake. States with low wage differentials also tend to have low numbers of female labourers. The female wage as a percentage of the male wage is taken into account when calculating wage inequality between states. The situation of those who depend on labour has gotten worse as a result of the noted drop in wage incomes, which is occurring at the same time as the loss in wage employment in rural areas. Mechanisation has made it harder for labourers to find work in more affluent states, and the move from rice to less labour-intensive crops could make jobs for labourers even more vulnerable. Low-income groups are also anticipated to be forced to consume fewer calories due to the state's scarcity of rice production and the ensuing rise in consumer costs. Such developments have led to a situation where rural households, that are reliant on female labour income, are disproportionately vulnerable to poverty and inadequate calorie intake. Thus, the labour-dependent households, which depend on female wages, confront significant economic and social challenges.

In addition to their fight against poverty for survival, these women exhibited an increasing defiance towards the outdated "traditional" or "feudal" and capitalist ideologies that were rooted in exploitation. According to Omvedt (1977), women have played a crucial role in



peasant movements, particularly in organizing impoverished peasants and agricultural labourers. Omvedt further emphasizes that male organizers from various leftist parties consistently acknowledged that "women were the most militant." They took the lead in protests, were the first to breach police barricades and engage in physical confrontations, displayed remarkable perseverance during negotiations, and even devised innovative methods of resistance, such as obstructing traffic on roads. This recognition of women as a formidable force within peasant struggles brought about a heightened awareness of the unique challenges faced by women in terms of both gender-based oppression and class-based oppression. Furthermore, in India, work participation and social status of women are influenced by caste. According to Chakravarti (1989), "non-Brahman castes, particularly peasant castes, have higher work participation rates for women compared to the 'twice-born' castes such as Brahman and merchants" (p. 166). While women hailing from impoverished and middle-peasant families engage in agricultural work, wealthier peasants tend to adhere to Sanskritic traditions of segregating women. Conversely, Dalit and Adivasi women exhibit even higher rates of labour participation due to their concentration in the lowest agricultural positions. Chakravarti (1989) elucidates that "Dalits experience a greater entanglement in capitalist exploitation, while Adivasis face feudal exploitation" (p. 166). It is crucial to acknowledge that the issue of agricultural labour transcends gender and encompasses caste dynamics as well. In 1961, the work participation rate for women in the general population stood at 27.95 percent, whereas it was 35.3 percent for Dalit women and 52.0 percent for Adivasi women (Chakravarti, 1989, p. 166). The impact of caste on work participation rates for women across the marginal spectrum leads women to participating greater numbers in all major revolts ranging from nationalist movement, peasant movement to the Naxal movement, marching towards their own liberation. Omvedt. (1977).

The women's participation in the Naxal Movement

The red book of the CPI (Maoist) examines various aspects of women's oppression and patriarchy. It addresses the origin of patriarchy, women's role in social production, the perpetuation of discrimination against women through culture, and feminist politics, reiterating that patriarchy is at the base of society and must be smashed for an equitable social order. It highlights the role of culture, education, media, religion, caste, and law in perpetuating discrimination against women. The declaration 'no revolution without women' and "there can



be no women's liberation without the liberation of the working class", based on the original Lenin quote 'there can be no liberation for the working class unless women are completely liberated' appealed to all exploited, subjugated and toiling working women. Women should be recognized as citizens and agents in the creation of new political structures. Concerns regarding the low percentage of women in leadership roles and at the top of political structures have been voiced by women's organisations for the past 20 years. As part of larger cultural questions that lead to women's disempowerment, they question why women are unable to rise to positions of intellectual and political leadership in various mainstream parties and movements, emphasising the need to eliminate conflict and all forms of conservatism and orthodoxy, particularly assaults on women during times of crisis. As a result, efforts must be made to create a transparent and democratic public space for women. The Naxalite movement challenged the traditional notion of women being confined to subordinate positions in conflicts, despite their active involvement in armed activities. They highlighted the fact that women continue to bear the burden of caring for others and performing reproductive labour, which further reinforces their marginalized status. They argue that women's questions are often dismissed as trivial, and the power dynamics between men and women are rarely addressed in revolutionary movements. They highlighted that control of female sexuality is responsible for the multi-layered oppression of women, which is yet not uprooted by any revolutions till date. Consequently, women's participation in the revolutionary movement has been swelling day-by-day.

Conclusion

The Naxalite Movement in India is perceived as a potential catalyst for creating a more equitable socioeconomic system for marginalized and subjugated populations. Its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment serves as a crucial indicator of its ability to uphold its professed principles of egalitarianism. Feminists hold differing views on the issue of women's participation in political movements. Some feminists argue that women's involvement in these movements merely reinforces patriarchal structures, while others see it as a way to challenge and break free from such structures. For the latter group, women's participation can be seen as a means of moving from the private sphere to the public sphere, and ultimately as a way of achieving greater gender equality. The issue of women's participation in political movements has opened new debates concerning women's status in



these movement, one perspective suggests that women's involvement in these movements may inadvertently fortify patriarchal structures, while other social scientist sees it as an opportunity to challenge and break free from such structures, hence it as a mechanism for transitioning from the private sphere to the public sphere, ultimately leading to greater gender equality.

Presently the challenge of the Contesting Intersectional Oppressions of class, caste, capitalism, patriarchy by women seems to be a tenacious struggle, for women encounter double marginalization during and after violent conflicts, at times they are direct victims of the brutalisation of security forces as the relatives (wives, daughters and mothers) of rebels and hence are continuously threatened, harassed and tortured in the name of inquiry as well as raped, killed and dispensed as suspects of rebellion and relatives of rebels. In Naxal conflict situations, women who fall victim to violence also face the distressing reality of being exploited by the Maoists, who demand various forms of support including food, accommodation, financial resources, and even sexual favours (Sen, 2010). Women are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse from both security forces and Naxalites themselves. According to media reports, several tribal women who were sexually exploited and abandoned by extremists sought help for rehabilitation (Times of India, 12 October 2010). Additionally, the All-India fact-finding team reports that there have been accusations of violence against tribal women, who visit forest for the collection of saal leaves, by both police and political cadres (Bhattacharya, 2009). Reports from fieldwork and human rights organizations also suggest that Maoists have raped women in conflict situations (Pyakurel, 2006). This double marginalization of women highlights the gendered impacts of violent conflicts and the need for greater attention to the experiences of women in these contexts (Sen, 2010). Bandopadhyay (as cited in Sen, 2010) argues that the Naxalite demand for a labouring woman's right to a life of dignity is limited by patriarchal assumptions inherent within it. Furthermore, some Naxalites are opposed to the creation of a separate women's wing, claiming that it would create division within the movement. This demonstrates the complex interplay between feminist and socialist ideologies in political movements, as well as the challenges of balancing different goals and priorities (Sen, 2010). There have been instances where women have been denied their economic rights, despite the Naxalites' call for land ownership by tillers. Male cadres in the Party Unity land acquisition movement argued against women's demands for land registration in their names, insisting that men were the "real" tillers and therefore should own the land (Bandopadhyay, as cited in Sen, 2010). Similarly, women were excluded



from land ownership and the abolition of vetti in the Telangana struggle, despite these being primary goals of the movement (Pyakurel, as cited in Sen, 2010). These cases reveal the persistence of patriarchal assumptions and practices within Naxalite movements, which hinder the realization of women's rights and the goal of gender equality. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) claims that 40 percent of its cadres are women, but female representation in leadership positions is minimal (Naxal Terror Watch, 2009). The Naxalite movement in India has seen women's participation and contributions, but it has also exposed the pervasive influence of patriarchy and the exclusion of women from decision-making positions and economic rights. The struggle against intersecting oppressions of class, caste, capitalism, and patriarchy remains a tenacious one for women, highlighting the need for continued efforts towards gender equality and social justice.

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