

Media the Mirror of Indian Culture

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The Beginning of the News Media in India

The history of editing and publication of newspapers in India from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, mostly from the beginning of the twentieth century, either by Europeans or by Indians were dictated by idealism and honesty of purpose. Peeping into the history of such publications in the colonial period we find that the pioneers were persons of great faith and principles and did not sacrifice their principles before the red eyes of the colonizers.

James Augustus Hiki, an Englishman, published the first weekly newspaper in India in 1780, titled Bengal Gazette or Calcutta General Advertiser. He announced in it the policy of the paper as “A Weekly Political and Commercial Paper Open to all Parties but Influenced by None.”

For his first announcement he didn't get the patronage of the authorities from the beginning of the life of his paper.

At that time there was no rule about the News Media. The Governor General used to issue regulations. If he did not like the work of any European he would banish him from the country. His decision was final. The Regulation framed by Sir Charles Metcalf overruled the earlier one of 1823. This was superseded by Lord Canning during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. This was termed by the opponents as the ‘Gagging Act’. In 1861 India Council's Act was passed which encouraged the spread of Newspapers. Some

of the newspapers established during the period still wield their influences in Indian society like, The Times of India (1861), The Pioneer (1865), The Statesman (1875) and The Hindu (1978).

So long the East India Company and then the government controlled the papers run by the Europeans. They often had troubles with them but settled at their own space. Gradually natives began publishing papers and the emergence of Sepoy Mutiny, Indigo Farmers's movement and other native problems gave rise to the establishment of large numbers of papers by the natives which prompted the Viceroy, Lord Litton, to introduce the Vernacular Press Act (IX) of 1878. At that time the numbers of newspapers by Indians in different parts of India, to mention the main stream of it, were, at Bombay 62, consisting of papers in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and Parsi; in North West and Central Provinces and Audh 60, in Bengal 28, and from Madras in Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam 19 papers.

Then the government passed Act No. XV of 1889; an Act to prevent the Disclosure of Official Documents and Information. It was done in connection with the publication of an item about Kashmir by the then famous Amrita Bazar Patrika.

The Press during the Independence Movement

Gradually the Independence movement and revolutionary activities were taking shape. Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin

Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Roy and some other freedom fighters were in the field and war of words started between them and the government. This process gradually gave rise to the formation of the Congress party in 1885. The idealistic urge of the freedom fighters, fighting against all odds, exposing the misdeeds and ulterior motives of the colonizers, gave birth to many periodicals which began to shape the society through social movements and politics. Raja Rammohan Roy began the movement and it spread through Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Kesari, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Banga Darshan and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Somprakash.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 gave birth to violent movement against the colonizers and all Indian leaders joined the movement exposing the ill motives of the government dividing the country and initiating the communal hatred in the name of administration, which grew into a great communal giant leading to the division of Indian subcontinent in 1947. Bengal movement gave birth to such a great paper as Bande Mataram, edited mostly by Sri Aurobindo in collaboration with Bipin Chandra Pal as cofounder of the paper. Sri Aurobindo claimed Purna Swaraj or full freedom from the shackles of the British and wrote in his paper in those early years, explaining the nature of Swaraj; "Swaraj is not the colonial form of Government. It means the fulfillment of our national life. That is what we seek, that is why God has sent us into the world to fulfill Him by fulfilling ourselves in our individual life, in the family, in the community, in the nation, in the humanity." (Sen /53)

As the banishment of European pioneers of newspapers at the beginning could not stop publication of papers containing news and features against the East India Company and the government, so during the age of freedom movement, with growing and expanding newspapers and periodicals throughout India, punishing the editors and printers, gagging the publication of papers and even stopping the publication of certain papers could not stop their proliferation, openly and secretly. Swami Vivekananda was a pioneer in spreading nationalistic ideas through his lectures and writings. The two periodicals published by the Ramakrishna Mission, Udbodhan and "Prabuddha Bharat", were the leading torch bearers and they still exist with their ideals and principles. Ramananda Chatterjee's Modern Review and Prabasi were significant additions to the list and his idealistic journalism galvanized the feelings and faith of the freedom fighters and countrymen for long years. Mahatma Gandhi's Young India served the purpose with high ideals and exemplary instances of journalism.

Against the anti nationalistic attitude adopted for personal benefits by some newspapers, soft pedaled by the government, during the war years, M. K. Gandhi made the following appeal to the Press in Bombay on 8 August, 1942 which was an example of honest journalism and courage before all journalists, freedom fighters and the public.

"The Press should discharge its obligations and duties freely and fearlessly and not allow itself to be cowed down or bribed by Government. Let the press be ready to be

closed down rather than allow itself to be misused by the authorities; and even to be prepared to sacrifice their buildings, machineries and big establishments. Let that be their reply to Puckle Saheb. Let it not sacrifice its self-respect and submit to humiliations. Almost the first stroke of the Repressive act has fallen on the Press-that potent instrument alike for good or for evil which in the modern day shapes (or mis-shapes) public opinion, and represents (or mis-represents) truth. What should be published and what not has been categorically stated by Government in their ordinance of the 8th August, 1942. The press was taken aback by such a notification. I felt like a person accustomed to swim freely in the flowing water in a river who is now bound hand and foot, who, is blindfolded and then asked to negotiate the eddies and rapids of the river in its freshes or the ebb and flow of the unrepresented tidal waves. It was to be expected that the press should look before leaping into this treacherous water.” (Sen / 50-51)

Delivering a lecture on the history of the period as published later, Hemendra Prasad Ghose, a great journalist of the time said,

“We are well aware of the treatment of the Press by the British Government in India. Even in 1943 when a severe famine was taking its toll in India the foreign correspondents in India were not permitted to cable abroad even the bare facts of deaths and hospital admissions due to starvation, issued daily in Calcutta by the Director of Information to the Bengal Government, lest the British and American public would know the

blunt facts of the situation. It reminds one of the Biblical expression- ‘Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon.’” (Ghose /80)

His advices to the newspapers are reminiscent of the works of the journalists of the period

“Newspapers, on the other hand have their duties to discharge as sentinels of the liberties of the public. They must abhor that attitude which ‘in nations grown corrupt’ love-bondage more than liberty- bondage with ease than strenuous liberty’

“Newspapers must be prepared to take the risks of their omission and suffer sacrifices whenever necessary. And they must develop personality, that mysterious complex of qualities whose citadel is never stormed by industry alone, and without whose gates brilliancy so often clamours in vain. Newspapers should regard every attempt to assail liberty as an act of sacrilege and every enemy of liberty an enemy who attempts the ‘Future’s portal with the Past’s blood rusted key.’ They must remember that: ‘The traitor to Humanity is the traitor most accursed.’” (Ghose /88-89)

He also said, “A subsidized Press is a servile Press and as such cannot discharge its functions properly. Every journalist who has regard for the responsibility of his profession must resent the idea of being subsidized. What are the traditions of journalism?” (Ghose /80)

The above may be said to be an idealistic age of the Indian Newspapers edited and published by idealistic people of strong character and strength.

The Press in Postcolonial India

Before independence the press was not only controlled but chided and subdued by the colonial government for protecting their interests. They closed many presses by coercive methods or by arresting the editors and others under different charges. After independence also the freedom of press was choked at times. A look at the "Bulletin of People's Union for Civil Liberties", founded by Dr. Jaya Prakash Narayan in 1976, tells us about the importance of freedom of press and the prevailing situation in the then India.

"Freedom of expression has always been emphasised as an essential basis for the democratic functioning of a society. The reasons for this are: the right of an individual to self-fulfillment, which right requires the communication of thought; the importance of constantly attempting to attain the truth, an attempt which is frustrated if information is suppressed or comment blocked; the inherent democratic right to participate in decision-making, which obviously implies the freedom to obtain, communicate and discuss information and the practical importance of maintaining the precarious balance between healthy cleavage and the necessary consensus it is of great importance that the citizens should be enabled to know what is happening in different regions and different sectors of the functioning of the society, and to listen to different and alternative approaches and comments, so that they can effectively participate in the process of self-government.

"Our actual experience since Independence, and especially in the last decade or so, also

suggests that a free and vigilant Press is vital to restrain corruption and injustice at least to the extent that public opinion can be roused as a result of press investigations and comments

"The experience of the Emergency also provided enough evidence to show how weak-kneed a very large part of the Indian Press was when it felt really threatened. One would not have believed that, during the independence movement, a much larger proportion of newspapers had faced difficulties and shown courage. The poor morale of many editors and others concerned was aptly characterized by the Janata Government's Minister for Information and Broadcasting who told the Press that, when they were only asked to bend, they crawled! Nevertheless, there were brave exceptions; and it is important to note who they were. Two of the so-called monopoly papers resisted encroachment on their freedom and faced considerable risks. These were the Statesman and the Indian Express. Of course even a more valiant attitude was shown by independent, small journals That the ruling group was thinking of controls over the Press as a permanent measure was indicated by the putting on the statute book of the Prevention of Publication of Objectionable Matters Act in 1976. It was also known that the spokesmen of Government were threatening newspapers about "consequences", after the censorship was lifted and general elections announced. These threats indicated what might have been in store for the Press if the Congress party had won the elections in March 1977." (PUCL Bulletin, July 1982)

Inherent Defects of the Media

Though gagging the liberty of the press does not happen often in postcolonial India the press themselves become victims of misuse of power and corruption by virtue of their monopolistic growth and technological development. The ownership of the Indian newspapers and other media are mostly controlled by the big industrial groups and such news media forms conglomerates. Not only industrial groups, they are owned sometimes by family and sometimes by foreign companies and financial bodies in different shapes, as efforts to invite foreign investment in media sector happened from 2002 onward in supersession of the previous directions of 1955-56. It has also been observed that some big news media are run by the charities of some foreign religious bodies. Though in most countries such media are controlled by capitalistic groups, controlling and regulating the freedom of the media it matters little if they are controlled by the communist groups for they are stricter in curtailing the freedom of press. It has been observed by the veteran journalists that media organisations and outlets conceal the fact that there is dominance over specific markets and market segments by a few players which makes the market oligopolistic in character. Cross-media ownership implies that particular companies or groups or conglomerates dominate markets both vertically and horizontally. Political parties or persons with political affiliations own and control increasing sections of the media. The PUCL in the above bulletin outlined the effect of such developments.

“It is also suggested that the editors and journalists cannot have adequate

freedom of collecting and disseminating facts and offering comments as they are under the pressure of the capitalist owners. It is further pointed out that free collection and dissemination of facts is not possible in the case of newspapers which depend to a large extent on revenue from advertisements as the advertising interests cannot but influence the presentation of news and comments. Unless this whole structure of ownership and control in the newspaper industry, and also the manner of the economic management of the Press, is changed, it is therefore suggested, the Press cannot be really free. (PUCL Bulletin, July 1982) 1

And

“With modern technology, large newspaper organisations enjoy various economies of scale. Groups and chains of newspapers are therefore in a better position to provide richer fare in their newspapers are bound to be businessmen/capitalists, and their overall approach to the society and its problems cannot but be conditioned by this. With State monopoly over broadcasting which prevails both technical and, in the Indian context, financial, the importance of the Press is even more crucial.” (PUCL Bulletin, July 1982) 2

Aldous Huxley envisaged all the conditions that were prevalent in the then modern newspaper organizations which carries value to this date too. “Aldous Huxley writes in *Science, Liberty and Peace*:

“The pen and the voice are at least as mighty as the sword; for the sword is wielded in obedience to the spoken or the written word. Progressive technology has strengthened the powers that be, by providing them not only with bigger and better instruments of coercion, but also with instruments of persuasion incomparably superior to those at the disposal of the earlier rulers . . . In countries where press is not free, newspapers are subsidized by the central government. The man who pays the piper always calls for the tune. In capitalist democracies the popular press supports its advertisers by inculcating the benefits of centralized industry and finance. In totalitarian states all newspapers preach the virtues of the governmental omnipotence, one-party politics and state control of everything. In both cases progressive technology has strengthened the hands of the governments by providing them with the means of persuading the many that concentration of political and economic power is for the general benefit.” (Sen /60)

By minute observations one may easily find that the industries and political parties control the whole scenario and this includes the family business houses which are dominated by business groups. Party's interests and favouritism are sometimes so blatantly practised that the whole thing becomes naked and shameful. Some groups of papers so blatantly support their favourite writers and artists, their favourite players and political personalities that not even an iota of neutrality becomes visible in such publicity and propaganda. All the big media have their favourite writers and big, multinational publishers, whose products

only are reviewed and given publicity. Nakedly they place their favourites irrespective of the existence of the others. Some newspapers regularly invite publishers to send their books for review but only a few publishers' works are focused. This falsehood was once exposed by a letter which the newspaper had no moral stand to publish. Some of the same newspapers which had shown courage earlier in defying control do it differently now in their own affairs. In some provinces the same film artists and painters, writers and other artists are awarded often for political reasons, shamelessly.

Awards in Indian contexts carry little value. Valueless by partial treatment; scattering of awards to strengthen the party, group or organization by enlisting submissive followers. The cricket player is presented as the greatest personality of a country representing its culture and tradition. With the media the establishments too join hands in awarding and giving publicity to their favourites. It is well known that the highest awards of the country, the awards to various artists and other personalities are tainted by nepotism. A country's moral fabric becomes weak and untenable when such nepotism is practiced in a big way. There is a big newspaper which upholds the works of its favourites, helps the communal groups in so naked way that the title of the newspaper, its very name is tainted while it gives publicity that it stands on its age old Indian heritage and culture, as one of the oldest heritage paper of the country. I recorded once that one writer was focused as news item or subject of photo show and feature in nine places /pages in the same day's paper. Their

favourites get nine times publicity on the same day. What more shameful act may there be of favouritism! And they are the big media who helps more the foreign writers than the writers and artists of the soil.

The misdeeds are more spread beyond the newspapers, mostly through the television channels which again are owned by the groups of industries and other vested interest groups which focus on the criminal acts and obscene, obscure shows more than sane and healthy ones. One finds it disgusting to be interrupted by repeated advertisements even while viewing the TV for only half an hour. Advertisements are sometimes immoral; made-easies are shown as the only panacea for all the problems of learning while educational institutions earn their share of profit; legitimately or illegitimately? Such advertisements in T.V.s often interrupt even when a national news channel delivers the important news. There are some channels which make crime and horror shows as their motto and attract large numbers of viewers who are prone to such acts. It works immorally against the society. A channel shows crimes as actually happened, dramatizing them, telling that such happenings are of recent origin, with all details of police station, their investigations. One wonders if such matters are sub judice how could they be enacted with all artists acting as in a drama or a work of fiction? Usually such things are shown by news media through TV channel, radio or newspapers. If such things are long past what is the justification of reviving such heinous acts in the celluloid? The additional attraction for such show is that it is declared to be actual facts, enacted by the film artists

who are seen in various serials. Such shows help the sadists and other criminals, give rise to criminal activities. The Mother of Pondicherry once equated the newspapers room as room of falsehood. Full of gossips, many times they contain false news, partial news and there are many victims of news. Some news is paid for while some news deserves but is never focused by the media. It is a hot subject how the news is sold. Yes, apart from all political influences, bossing by the governments and bribing the journalists, the whims of the main players of the media play big parts.

In an interview to the Deputy Editor of "India Today", Damayanti Dutta, Justice Markandey Katju, Chairman of the Press Council of India, opened his disgusted heart in answer to her question, "You have critiqued the media from the time you took over as the Chairman of Press Council of India. What is it that you object to?" on 27 January, 2012, "The media has lost its sense of proportion. Ninety per cent of Indian media coverage, especially electronic media, goes to providing entertainment - lives of film stars, fashion parades. Cricket, disco dancing, reality shows, astrology and so on. Broadly, the media has three roles: to provide information, entertainment and leadership. The first two are traditional roles. Even there, one must have a sense of proportion. How is the Indian media justified in mostly showing glamour, pop music and half-naked women in a poor country? There is cricket day in and day out on our television. Cricket is really the opium of the Indian masses. During the India-Pakistan match at Mohali in March last year, the media hyped it up as if a Mahabharata

war was on. Had I not spoken out, the birth of a film star's child would have been on the front page of every newspaper. When Dev Anand died, it became front page headlines in several leading newspapers and I raised my voice against it since 250,000 farmers in India committed suicide in the last 15 years but this was hardly published anywhere except by P. Sainath of *The Hindu*.”³

“Sir Fretful Plagiary in Sheridan's *The Critic* exclaimed, “The newspapers! Sir, they are the most villainous-licentious-abominable-infernal-Not that I ever read them-no-I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper.” (Ghose /79)

Crisis in the Media Industry

The news media across the globe is in crisis, especially after the economic slowdown and financial crisis of 2008-09. Its place has rapidly been filled up by the technology companies like Google, Yahoo and others who are aggressive enough to gobble up the major share of the print media, forcing the news media to choose the path of electronic production in bigger ways. Thousands of journalists lost their jobs in the United States. N. Ram, the editor-in-chief of *The Hindu* said in his speech in December 2011 that,

“There has been some recovery, or to be more precise, a slowdown in the decline beginning mid-2010. But printed newspaper circulation and readership are in irreversible decline across the developed world; they have been in steady, long term, secular decline much before the recent recession hit these countries and their news media.”⁴

He also quoted from a talk by Christoph Riess, chief executive officer of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) at the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum in Vienna in October 2011 that “Circulation is like the sun. It continues to rise in the East and decline in the West”.⁵

In the midst of this old media crisis, more and more people are reading newspapers digitally. The terms of trade are shifting remorselessly in favour of the web, mobile, and newer interactive digital platforms. It still comes mostly free-to-air but some major western newspapers have begun to price their digital content, it has been reported.

The internet advertising model is doing exceedingly well but it is the search engines, above all Google, that take the lion's share of the revenue; the paid-content model is also well established on the mobile platform. New digital players put increasing pressure on newspaper circulation, readership, and the business itself, the newspaper representatives complain.

Quoting Riess, Ram again said that

“While daily print newspaper circulation has been in the decline globally, by 17 per cent between 2006 and 2010 in the United States, 11.8 per cent in western Europe, and 10 per cent in eastern and central Europe, it has risen 16 per cent in the Asia Pacific region and 4.5 per cent in Latin America over the same period (Riess 2011).”⁶

India and China have taken up the role model in publishing nearly three-fourths of

the world's leading, top selling 100 newspapers. Regional language papers are taking the lead in selling their products in India.

Internet and Mobile phones rival the traditional media

Reports from the Internet and Mobile Association of India and Indian Market Research Bureau revealed that the number of Internet users in India would reach 302 million by December 2014, registering a Y-o-Y growth of 32% over last year. In October 2014, there were 278 million internet users in India. Currently, India has the third largest internet users' base in the world. It was estimated that by December 2014, India would overtake the US as the second largest Internet users' base in the world. China currently leads with more than 600 million internet users while the US currently has estimated 279 million internet users. According to the report, the number of internet users in urban India has grown by 29% from October 2013 to reach 177 million in October 2014. It is expected to reach 190 million by December 2014 and 216 million by June 2015. Significantly, compared to last year, in rural India, Internet users have increased by 39% to reach 101 million in October 2014. It is expected to reach 112 million by December 2014 and 138 million by June 2015. As on June 2014, 31.5 million (61%) in 35 cities were using Internet on a daily basis. The daily user base has gone up by 51% from June 2013. 96% of the Internet users are accessing Internet at least once a week. Out of these, 18% access Internet 4 to 6 times a week and 14% access Internet 2 to 3 times a week. 7

The Contents and the language

When everything is said the contents are left though all debates so far are around the contents. Paradoxical as it may seem, there remains certain things about the contents we have not discussed so far. The contents of the regional papers are varied. The regional newspapers concentrate mainly on local news full of squibs, cranks and cracks about the local politics, the leaders and their activities. Most of such papers are owned or influenced by some or the other political leaders. They contain more news about crimes, suicides, deaths and the curious things. They supply food for news, gossip and speculation. Squabbles, rivalry and revengefulness are the main bases of such papers. They contain little of international news. This trend is visible even with very popular regional newspapers.

In many towns very few stalls sell English newspapers. Regional papers satisfy the hunger of the locals all right but English is a common lingua franca in India and unlike the foreigners or foreign goods it is no longer foreign to us. English, an international language, is spoken by large numbers of people of the English speaking world like America, Australia, Canada, Africa and many other countries, once colonies of G.B. and in the country of its origin. It has spread to the other countries as the common medium of human communication. It has become the common international language. To bring in and publish international news in English is easier than in any other Indian language. There arises no need for translation like no need for interpreter when we exchange through a common language. It is a language

which we have acclimatized. It is called Indian English and huge volumes of literature are produced in it throughout the world, bringing fame and business and all sorts of human exchange. So the need for newspapers in English arise for spreading our understanding and knowledge horizontally. In a place the language of which is not my own an English language paper would help me better. Many do not read newspapers in print where only regional language papers are sold for all places are now cosmopolitan and not all have the same mother tongue.

Spreading Hindi through digital media and T.V. Screens even when news in a local language of a province is delivered may be to fulfil the aim of the government to push it but it becomes an intruder. It is better to ascertain how far people rejoice or swallow it. Though they may not speak against, it goes beyond their understanding as it happened recently when the Prime Minister wanted to communicate with students everywhere in India. It creates gap in relationship, or may create some resentment in people's hearts to be expressed in due time. Hindi is the language of the majority but every language in India has equal value and there are richer languages spoken by numbers close to the language of the majority. Some Indian languages are spoken in some foreign countries and their speakers are not very insignificant.

Conclusion

Two major media traditions are prevalent in India; the older tradition of a diverse, pluralistic, and relatively independent press, and the younger tradition of state-controlled

radio and television. They continue side by side but the audio-visual is fast taking a grip over the older media. In contrast to television, radio as a news medium remains a state monopoly in India. The television indulges in celebrity worship, vapid talk shows, scandal, and even voyeurism at the expense of a healthy growth of the society.

Television has become the cynosure of the Indian audience. And it is being misused to a great extent as has been observed by Markandey Katju. I strongly feel that cricketers and models can never be the national representatives of the country. If we sail only in popular winds distributing awards and honours to the favourites and help more flow of that wind in our sail in a situation like India where most of the people cannot be said to be really educated with real discerning capacity and culture, the culture of the country with the media will go haywire.

Not only the choking of freedom of press restricted or restricts discharging the duties and obligations of the media but also the inner conflicts and disharmonies, inherent defects of the body of the media restrict discharging its duties and obligations.

While freedom of the press is important as it is thought to be the representative of the people, carrying people's voice, unlimited freedom of the press also have anti-people effect. Newspapers select all news, twist them to their purpose, publish even letters to the editors as per their whim, if it suits their policy. But there must be some area where an individual or a group of individuals need to express their ideas and requirements freely without any intervention by the

editors or others in the press. Since newspapers are people's voice they must remain so and help the people to express freely through some columns kept free for them.

I may mention that previously the English language newspapers had columns where the people from Pondicherry and surrounding vast areas could express their ideas and grievances but such things no longer exist and even letters are not published if it does not suit the newspaper's policy. After all, the media which depend on the public cannot be treated exclusively as private property. So many things happen in smaller towns and mofussils which are environmentally and otherwise challenging but such news rarely appears even in responsible news media. Newspapers sometimes seem to be subsidized by the governments and advertisers though not in black and white. "A subsidized Press is a servile Press and as such cannot discharge its functions properly", said Hemendra Prasad Ghose as quoted earlier (Ghose /80)

Because of the falling sales some newspapers are priced very high; rupees five and six on other days or more on Sundays

but they have stopped publishing additional pages or booklets or magazines and feature pages apart from the routine ones, which may give better cultural satisfaction to the readers. Surely it is that sales of the printed newspapers have been reduced but they are still published as a business policy, most of the big newspapers are monopolistic in nature.

By recording the happenings in the society the media becomes the mirror of its culture and habits. Question is how truthful and faithful are the recordings. Apart from recording the events the media play their part of doing and undoing things as they happen in a society. If the media give up the business motive, give up the idea of becoming another political entity of the country, adhere to their conscience and hear the sane voices of the people of wisdom, they may surely climb to greater heights and lift the cultural standards of the people and the country. Let me remind the media of their position and the needs of the hour with the great words of wisdom by the American Playwright Arthur Miller, "A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself." 8

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