Synthesis and Evolution: Cultural Syncretism and the Historical Formation of the Contemporary Hindu Spiritual landscape

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Abstract

Thestudy of the evolution and synthesisof religious traditions, sacredness, and ritual traditions requires an integrated and systematic academic approach. Incorporating perspectives from the past, ethnography, and anthropology is essential to gain a deeper understanding of this subject. The evolution of spiritual perspectives and cult practices in Southern Indian hamlets and among little communities can be traced back to early prehistoric times. Spirituality and religious frameworks have historically represented the most dominant societal discourse and cultural construct encompassing a variety of components such as cult practices, rites and rituals, and divinity that are common to many cultures. Anthropological and historical observations suggest that several factors, such as prevalent social memory, cultural and social stigmas, myths, culture of fear, and inherited dispositions, have fundamentally shaped the development patterns within the framework of contemporary Semitic religions. Many 'sub-religions' within the larger framework of Western-oriented 'religions' originate from 'cults' that are culturally and historically ancient compared to many prevailing Semitic religious frameworks. The theoretical perspective offered by 'cultural anthropology' suggests that Spiritual evolutions and the influence of the community imagination of ancestral societies have played a role in the formation and advancement of cultural hallmarks.

Keywords: Sacredness, Cult, Stigma, Ritual, Tradition, Sub-religion, Spirituality, Semitic. Framework. Community Imagination, Fear.

Introduction

Indian society is a multi-ethnic environment with a diverse and multifaceted cultural past, apparent in the various religious and ritual traditions that evolved and are prevalent within the social jurisdiction of the Indian subcontinent. One of the distinguishing

characters of the Indian spiritual past is the synthesis of numerous ethnic and cultural influences, including orthodox, heterodox, and tribal influences. This process of syncretism entails the existence of numerous distinctly regional, Pan-Indian, and blended forms of the diverse spiritual and ritual traditions that evolved and became prevalent within the social jurisdiction of the Indian subcontinent. This process of the intermingling of cultures and syncretism is one of the most influential contributors to the development of the contemporary framework of the Hindu religion. It has provided an instrumental impact in defining India's cultural and religious landscape.

The distinctive element of Indian culture is the infiltration of elements of assimilation of multi-layered diverse cultural traditions that, over time, became segmented into elite and non-elite traditions. The intellectual and philosophical dimensions of Indian spirituality that were later interpolated into Indian culture, the various monarchies that spread from the central Gangetic plains and then the Deccan to Peninsular India alongside the subsequent agrarian and non-agricultural economy, and the materialism that began with trade networks are the various determinants that created the earlier described upper and lower categories. Throughout Indian history, these two categories have played an increasingly prominent part in the structural and organisational evolution of Indian culture. They have contributed to reconstructing the spiritual structures of Indian culture based on diversity. These categories contributed within their limits to the cultural and social formation and the transition and evolution of ritual tradition, religion, deities and spiritual institutions. These interpolations have remained mainly components of the Indian Hindu spiritual framework that continues to this day. In response to the elite and non-elite dichotomy that emerged in Indian society as part of the proliferation of the Varna scheme as well as later emerged currency of the grand narratives of Sanskritic tradition, categorised them as Brahminic and non-Brahminic traditions of Indian society.

In Indian culture, there has developed an array of Brahminical and non-Brahminical rites, rituals, spiritual landscapes and temple institutions, narratives, and parables, many of which have been associated with the discourse of Hinduism, which has itself undergone very dynamic and philosophical changes. The Hindu framework needs to be revised to comprehend the origin, expansion, and evolution of these Brahmanical transformations. The generalisation of this mode of articulation is not feasible in contemporary Hindu religious practices in India due to the universal or parochial influence of both Brahminical and non-

67 Brahminical tribal Buddhist and Jain cultural traditions. Indian cultural traditions are based
68 on integration and assimilation rather than rejection since their genesis. Despite the dominant
69 Brahminical influences, ethnic traditions cannot be excluded entirely from such cultural
70 combinations. Since the varna system and the caste and sub-castes that were incorporated
71 later were all in the perspective of the hierarchical Brahminical framework, and the land
72 grants, agrarian expansion, and political formations of the early medieval period in the Indian
73 subcontinent were largely Brahmin-centric, this process of religious integration was
74 dominated by the Brahmin community. The influence of Brahmanical tribal and heterodox
75 elements on today's religious fabric has been demonstrated through ethnographic studies and
76 ritual investigations of spiritual landscapes. However, the more crucial point is that this
77 syncretic process continues today.
78
79   It has been asserted that long before the Vedic-Brahmanic-Hindu admixture entered
80 Indian culture, rites and rituals were formulated to express devotion to God. The deities
81 represented nature-inspired animistic patterns based on ethnic tradition or tribal gatherings in
82 which ancestors were worshipped or later developed fertility deities associated with village-
83 based agricultural practices. It is indisputable that such ethnic models can be historically
84 identified in both Northern and Peninsular India. However, it is dynamically visible in South
85 Indian village communities, even after the proliferation of the Brahminic scheme of worship,
86 that these ethnic models are persistent. There were a multitude of ethnic tribal models that
87 were either marginalised or under-recognised by the most potent and magnificent narratives
88 of the Sanskritic tradition, which were based on hierarchical power structures and legitimised
89 the Brahminic scheme within the context of emerging ritual purity and the expansion of
90 agricultural tradition, which were based on hierarchical power structures and legitimised the
91 Brahminic scheme within the context of emerging tendencies of ritual purity and the
92 expansion of temple-centric settlements.
93

The Conceptual Understanding of Syncretism

95   The syncretic model in religious tradition mostly refers to merging or combining
96 diverse beliefs or ideologies and thereby assimilates them to comprehend their underlying
97 unity. This approach, mostly connected with religion, provides a more comprehensive and
98 inclusive understanding of the similarities between two seemingly distinct thought practices.
99 Typically, Syncretism views religion, ethnicity, and culture as pure and distinct entities. It
100 emphasizes the fluidity of these concepts by providing them to remain as unique while

balancing the integration of similar ideas.The theory of Syncretism finds practical applications in various fields, especially art, cultural studies, ethnography, and the study of traditions. Syncretism has been employed equally as theoretical framework and social process which illustrate the evolution of spiritual traditions in the religious context of South India. It occupies specific relevance in the domain of religion. Syncretism can serve as a bridge to end this never-ending discussion, particularly by adopting a historical and ethnographic approach. Moreover, it aims to demonstrate the similarities between two seemingly disparate ideals and uncover the commonalities, prevailing in various religious systems. Thus, Syncretism proves most useful in its application to the concepts of religion and culture. Syncretism is a viable approach in theory because it possesses cultural characteristics. An outstanding example to this is obscurity in determining the comparative significant influence of one from the rest of the cultures or religions, in varied situations. In other words, it will lead to divergent views. Another example relates to this using of Syncretic framework in the Indian context, having multiplicity of religious traditions and cult practices but significantly varies from region to region. Furthermore, it may not match with Syncretic tools and the understanding of religious traditions can be contextualised through other perspectives. The understanding of religion and culture usually differs from oriental and Occidental perspectives. Nevertheless, Syncretism provides a platform for studying various concepts in a unified way, including the analysis of various contexts of the conglomeration of traditions, particularly in religion.

The Evolution of Religious Studies: Insights into Ritual, Cult, Sect, and Religion

The quintessential question concerning the most evolved contemporary version of Hinduism is metaphorically and popularly used to designate a religion rather than explaining and conceptualising the subcomponents within the larger framework. Generally, religion is a framework of prescribed conducts and customs, ethical principles, beliefs, perspectives, sacred scriptures, disciplines and taboos, spiritual settlements, sacred predictions, and congregations primarily relating communities to deific, metaphysics, and sacred elements. The larger framework of religion requires its members to adhere to non-textual and textual components in every culture. Sociological, anthropological, materialistic, and psychological explanations are given to explain the concept of religion during the past few centuries. The most problematic concern concerning these larger frameworks is their unsuitability for theorising them to explain Hinduism's historical expansion and evolution and many subcategories, such as non-brahminic, animistic, tribal, or ethnic traditions exhibiting ritualistic or cult-oriented belief practices. The four elements of religion, divinity, ritual

135 practices, and faith have historically been explained as the creation of community
136 imaginations and segmented collective memories deeply embedded into human conscience as
137 reflected in sociological theories of religion.[1] During the formative stages of each of these,
138 the cultures will evolve through centuries of cultural beliefs, traditions, folktales, multiple
139 cultural narratives, and predominantly cultural integrations and exchanges. The most visible
140 and coherent example of this assimilation is the shift from ecological spirituality to
141 iconographic institutional-centric spirituality. The evolution of these cultures can be
142 understood better within the context of historical geography, where each represents different
143 ecological terrains earlier in the form of a forest terrain to a more sustained and sophisticated
144 institutional network often referred to as temple settlements.[2]

145

146   In explaining the intermingling of multiple religious compositions, anthropologists,
147 sociologists, and cultural theorists use entwined concepts such as syncretism, Sanskritization,
148 cultural hybridity, assimilation, and cultural exchanges as they relate to religious and cultural
149 exchanges. In the geographic and ecological context of the intermingling of various sacred
150 traditions, the historical antecedents were depicted as a multilinearly cultural evolution from
151 a pre-urban band gathering to a lineage-based hybrid agro-urban social order with an evident
152 shift from a densely vegetated terrain to a more organised social space. This multilinear
153 theory of evolution also refers to the pattern of geographical shift and the absorption and
154 intertwining of divinities, little narratives, and ritual practices. The Brahmanized cultures
155 exhibit a dominant culture attributed to the Brahmanizers and counter influences that are
156 present segments and were conceptualised as universal exchanges and parochial exchanges in
157 the classical sociological framework. The problematic aspect concerning this interaction and
158 assimilation of multiple cultures is the identity of the more significant subcategories,
159 referring to them as territorial, religious, sectarian, or cultus categories. The expressions of
160 Hinduism in contemporary contexts differ significantly according to their geographic, cultus,
161 sectarian, and most widely acknowledged religious identifiers.

162

163   An integrated and systematic academic approach is vital to explore the evolution and

1. Ronald Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*, Prentice Hal, Hoboken,1996, p. 39.
2. Gunther Dietz Sontheimer, *The Vana and the Shetra: The Tribal Background of Some Famous Cults. The Routledge Handbook of the State in Premodern India*, Routledge, New Delhi, p.122.

164 development of religious practices, sacredness, and ordination, and this subject can be
165 explored by incorporating perspectives from the past, ethnography, and anthropology.
166 Spirituality and religious frameworks are the most dominant societal discourses and cultural
167 constructs throughout history, and they have historically encompassed components common
168 to many cultures, such as cult practices, rituals, and divinity. Anthropological and historical
169 observations have shown that several factors, such as the prevalent social memory, cultural
170 stigmas, myths, and the culture of fear, fundamentally influence the development patterns of
171 contemporary Semitic religions.[3] Within the larger framework of Western-oriented 'religions',
172 several of these subcategories originate from 'cults' that are culturally and historically ancient
173 compared to many prevailing Semitic religious frameworks.[4] The theoretical perspective
174 offered by cultural anthropology holds the position that the prospect in the formation and
175 advancement of the aforementioned cultural hallmarks has been employed by
176 anthropomorphism in conjunction with the influence of the community image of ancestral
177 societies.

178 The cult concept within contemporary culture inevitably evolves into more significant
179 complexities and institutionalism over time by constituting an indispensable component of a
180 broader social system. There is a centrifugal movement among the little communities. This
181 ethnic and social group establishes the hierarchy of cults and sacredness among early
182 societies. It then transforms from a parochial model of worship to a more expansive or
183 Sanskritized pattern of worship.[5] Sacred cult points and worshipping models can be found in
184 all societies. All of them are defined by a dominant, hierarchical social structure that has
185 developed over time through continual intercultural collaboration. This has been recognised
186 as a rational development through the reciprocal engagement of two distinct categories,
187 enabling the constructive integration of universalisation and parochialization mechanisms.[6]
188 There has been a gradual alteration in religious preferences due to adaptation, acculturation,
189 and modification of existing spiritual paradigms of a locale through social development and
190 political formations extending from institutionalisation to multicultural paradigms and

3. Michael M. Horowitz, 'The Worship of South Indian Deities in Martinique', *Ethnology*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,1963, pp.339–346.
4. Martin E. Marty,' Sects and Cults', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 332, No. 2, United Kingdom,1960, pp. 125–134.
5. McKim Marriott, 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization', in Mckim Marriott (ed.) *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1955, pp.171-222.
6. Martin E. Marty, 'Sects and Cults', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 332, issue.1, Sage, California,1960, pp.125–34.

191 technological accessibilities. This alteration has originated primarily from a historical point
192 where the interaction and assimilation process of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin cultures
193 converged under a cultural jurisdiction, and the migrant category has influenced the original
194 inhabitants. Migration of communities and the exchange of ideas are organic processes within
195 a cultural jurisdiction; however, during the early stages of syncretism, offering land grants to
196 Brahminic communities and legitimising ritual monopoly made this process more political
197 than highlighting the cultural fabrics.

198

199 **Syncretism in Indian Subcontinent: A Historical Perspective**

200   Historicizing the terminologies within the framework of modern cultural perceptions
201 such as Hindu, Brahmin, and non-Brahmin deeply demands cultural evolution to these terms
202 found in textual references stretching from early historical to contemporary times. In early
203 Greek-Persian and Arabic accounts and Farci narratives, the term Hindu refers to a
204 geographical landmark representing a community within a specific geographical area of the
205 subcontinent. The social and culturally complex nineteenth-century colonial academic
206 initiatives have primarily portrayed the term Hindu within a semantic framework described as
207 the spiritual platform of upper caste strata. However, it is also interesting to note that the
208 Brahminic intervention toward the multiple traditions and cult practices was previously a
209 dominant constituent of the same pantheon and either eliminated or assimilated organically
210 and politically. The colonial and Brahminic interventions in altering the term Hindu to
211 Hinduism constituted historically parallel processes; however, the term gradually attained
212 widespread currency throughout the subcontinent metaphorically to describe a counter-
213 hegemony toward colonial dominance. The historical evolution of Hinduism to the
214 framework of a Semitic religion needs to be revised, especially considering the particularities
215 of parallel religions and internal ritual traditions. The undefined and complex nature of the
216 contemporary perspective of 'The Hindu religion' is its plurality in textuality, divinity,
217 centrality, and the exclusion of a singular soteriology.[7] Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the
218 Hindu religious corpus profoundly influenced the proto-type categories of ritual traditions
219 and cult practices throughout the subcontinent.

220

221   Identifying the essential contemporary notion of the term Hindu indeed expresses the
222 image of a well-codified religious structure adherently followed by the communities followed

7.   Gavin D. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, CUP, Cambridge,1996, pp.5–6.

223 by the people around the globe, more precisely in the geographical regions of southeast Asia.
224 However, Jonathan Smith(2004) has asserted an insightful perspective that contemporary
225 religious frameworks, including Hinduism, are essentially a bi-product of scholarly
226 engagements and imaginative thinking, which encompasses numerous fragmented elements
227 such as rediscovered textual traditions, local narratives, ritual practices, monumental
228 institutions, philosophies, and doctrines which codifies into a significant category.[8] Besides
229 these academic engagements, the Western orientalists, on one side, devoted more attention to
230 formulating a new category of spiritual practices to explore and publish the plurality of
231 sacredness in India. Parallelly, a category of Indian nationalists and reformers was also
232 encouraged to employ within the same structure with various priorities, including
233 rediscovering India and using religion to construct nationalism. A well-defined and well-
234 structured academic model of Hinduism dates to the latter half of the nineteenth and the
235 beginning of the twentieth century; however, early streams of thought and culture are
236 discernible as early as the cultivation of the Neolithic village settlements to the urban centres
237 of the Indus civilisation.[9]

238   Initially, European archaeologists and historians attempted to correlate the features of
239 the Harappan religion with the artefacts, which was problematic and historically unclear.
240 Furthermore, the scholarly attempts to portray the 'Harappan religion' framework could be
241 more problematic because many of these attempts describe the framework from the
242 perspective of a subsequently evolved Hindu religious pantheon. By analysing the degree of
243 interaction between the early and later traditions, we can find the process of syncretism, the
244 adaptation of early cultures, and the cultural continuity in Harappan culture's later cultural
245 periods. Asko Parpola (1976) has primarily proposed a model of an Archaeological-Linguistic
246 framework by examining the interaction between early and later cultures mentioned earlier.

247   These two categories are mainly defined within the context of early ceramic cultures
248 in the Indo-Gangetic valley.[10]Zvelebil (1965) has identified the early makers of red and black
249 ware pottery with the Dravidian linguistic cultures in terms of their cultural continuity and

8. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago,2004, p.14.
9. Asko Parapola, 'The Sky-Garment: A Study of the Harappan Religion and its Relation to the Mesopotamian and Later Indian Religions', *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, Vol.57, No. 1, Helsinki, Finland,1985, p.216.
10. Asko Parapola,' The pre-Vedic Indian background of the Śrauta rituals', *Agni. The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar,* Vol.2, No. 1, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp.41-75.

250 similarity with the early urban settlers of the Indus Valley.[11] Considering the contentions

251 made by such philologists and archaeologists, the possibilities are considerable given that a

252 Pan-Indian Proto-Dravidian linguistic culture was widespread throughout the subcontinent

253 even before the influx of Indo-European linguistic communities into early Indian social order.

254 An early indication of syncretism of multiple cultural traditions in Indian religious

255 frameworks may have been this interaction of the multilingual cultural tradition.

256

257 The early cultivating settlers of Neolithic revolution India, identified through artefacts

258 and the religious relics and sculptures of mature Harappan civilizational sites, demonstrate

259 the early signs of ethnic-animistic patterns of cult practices, which are often intertwined with

260 nature worship. The sculptural remains found from the archaeological sites of the Indus

261 civilization have offered a plethora of clay and steatite figures expressing the particularities of

262 an ethnic pattern of religious tradition. In addition, their identity has been identified as an

263 independent cult practice rather than equated with later religious traditions. The cultic

264 representation of the female figurines in early Harappan cultural settlements primarily

265 represented the 'Mother Goddess' due to its fertility and maternity manifestations. The early

266 archaeological documentation of the Harappan religion suddenly after the early excavations

267 mostly followed a tendency to connect the newly excavated unknown deities with the later

268 developed spiritual framework. The nomenclature is given as *Pasupathi Shiva* to a male

269 figure and *Sakambari* to a female fertility figure, suggesting the depiction of a solid South

270 Indian Dravidian semblance in such sculptures. The divinities we are discussing within the

271 historical context of South Indian non-brahmin spiritual tradition, the sculptural

272 representations of *Naga*, *Yaksha*, and fertility goddesses, are sculpturally expressing certain

273 degrees of affinities with the cultic figures excavated from Harappan sites. It is problematic to

274 assert that Harappa originated such ethnic cult practices later found in south Indian village

275 communities, mainly referred to as Dravidian deities. However, pre-origin elements or a

276 striking cultural continuity is visible in the south Indian village deities suggesting the

277 possibility of interaction, exchanges, and assimilations.

278

279 The cultural transition from the historical past documented by material findings of the

280 Indus Valley to the period represented in early textual tradition in early India has specifically

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11. KamilZyelebil, 'Harappa and the Dravidians, an old mystery in a new light', *New Orient*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Orient Society, New York,1965, pp. 65-69.

281 indicated the entry and the expansion of a new category of religious tradition in the Indian
282 subcontinent. Furthermore, due to the sacrificial framework affinity towards deities of later
283 origin, the newly emerging traditions have been classified as orthodox and highly close to
284 contemporary Hindu religious practices.

285

286 **Temple-Centric Worship in South India: A New Turn in the Evolution of Religious**
287 **Practices**

288 Temples in Southern India are not just places of worship; instead, they are centres of a
289 social structure of their own. The temple centres around the deity worshipped there, and the
290 procedures and rituals are all connected to that deity as per belief. In a way, the deity creates a
291 sovereign of its own in the situation, becoming the nucleus of the whole process. Multiple
292 poojas, festivals and all are celebrated in the name of the deity in the belief that the deity
293 inhabits the worshipped stone idol.

294

295 Certain temples also function with a system of hierarchy, wherein certain rituals or
296 functions are conducted, which provide a great of honour and superiority for the worshipper.
297 Temples also follow a system of particularities, wherein certain roles are fixed for certain
298 people of a specific class or gender, such as the role of the temple priest. There is also a
299 system of decorum that should be followed within the temple, anchored by the belief that it
300 will displeasure the deity if behaved otherwise. A system of endowments also forms a
301 transactional relationship between the person and the temple. For the services provided to the
302 welfare of the temple in the way of human resources or other resources, he/she will gain a
303 superior position in certain rituals. This is a two- maintains the temple and the person's belief.
304 This system is also applicable in that service to the temple/deity.[12]

305

306 The evolved Hindu temple system is structured such that in a single place, there may
307 exist different temples for different deities. Though Hinduism has many deities, and each has
308 its own, sometimes interconnecting mythos, there is no such profound difference in their
309 worship. Therefore many, two or three temples can coexist in a single place. Even so, certain
310 cults consist of worshippers of a single deity among the many. The Shaivites and the
311 Vaishnavites are the two major branches influential in South Indian Temple Culture and

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12. Arjun Appadurai, and Carol Breckenridge, 'The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and
Redistribution', Contributions to Indian Sociology, Vol. 10, No. 2, Sage,
California, 1976, pp. 187-211.

Hinduism. So, the temple system focuses on an authoritative deity, worshipped in a calendrical fashion with the authoritative centre of the temple. However, more than just an institution of religion, temples have developed into social and cultural centres in the growing times. Faith has connected somewhere with the idea of benefit, and since then, they have coexisted.

Insights and Major Findings

The central theme of the study is that the modern Hindu religious structure in Indian Subcontinent has emerged from a syncretic evolution—an amalgamation of diverse mixed traditions. This ongoing process indicates that the prevailing Brahmanic traditions have frequently surpassed or incorporated the region's initial ethnic and various nonconformist traditions. However, the research also suggests a mutual exchange, indicating the existence of "visible counter exchanges" or a "local influence" of ethnic customs on Brahmanic traditions. Ultimately, this syncretism is seen as a societal tool functioning alongside the caste structures of the Brahmanic tradition, enabling the flexible transformation of non-Brahmanic spiritual inclinations through the integration and embrace of Brahmanic methods.

A major emphasis is placed on Brahmanisation as a crucial factor in transforming the spiritual landscape. This is believed to have entailed a "greater transformation" in which ancient, crude, and basic animistic carvings were supplanted by finely-made stone sculptures featuring a tantric approach to spiritual purification. This change is perceived because of various gods and their worship systems being incorporated and enhanced through Brahmanic impact. Moreover, the "universalisation" of non-Brahmanic and heterodox traditions is depicted as a consequence of Brahmanic expansion, which involved substituting original figures, like non-Brahmanic priests, with Brahmanic priesthood at local ethnic worship sites.

The research also highlights a significant change in worship practices, particularly the move from a localized, nature-based approach to a more centralized and structured form. The ongoing process of syncretism is defined by nature-centered ecological spirituality—which historically emphasized sacred groves and nature—being integrated into a temple-focused and Neo-Brahminism framework. This temple-focused method is characterized as embracing a mixed style of corporate spirituality.

In conclusion, the rich religious and cultural past of India has produced the nation's Syncretic spiritual tradition. It has been shaped by many cultural influences, sociopolitical

shifts, and the development of ethnic and Brahminic traditions. The Syncretic movement has persevered in the face of difficulties and disputes, adjusting to the circumstances and providing a spiritual route that considers the variety of India's religious legacy. The Syncretic tradition, which remains a vital component of the rich cultural legacy of the subcontinent, is a great illustration of how several traditions may blend to produce something fresh and significant.

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380

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