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Housing Pattern of Nicobar Tribes- Before And After Tsunami

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Abstract

One third of the world's tribal and indigenous population, that is, over 104 million tribal people live in India (8.6%). The Nicobarese, who are of Mongloid Stock are a large population of over 27,000. The earthquake and tsunami in 2004 has had impact not only on the human lives but also on material culture. Soon after this tragedy, the islands are inundated with many developmental programmes with the initiation of international and national voluntary agencies and government in the name of rehabilitation and resettlement. The present paper attempts to highlight the significance of traditional housing pattern of Nicobar tribes and their rehabilitation of the lives of the Nicobarese and the consequences of modern development in post tsunami. The study also attempted to know how the modern developmental programmes are transforming the traditional life of the natives and eventual impact on the loss of indigenous knowledge.

Keywords: Tusnami, Nicobar, Tribes, Indigenous, house style, living condition, development.

Introduction

The concept of "tribe" in India is a much contested one, and shares overlapping definition with a number of nomenclatures – "indigenous people", "adivasis" and even "Scheduled Tribes" (Béteille 1998; Kuper 2003; Radhakrishna 2016 and Nayak et.al, 2019). India, one of the biggest low-middle income country has 8.6% of tribal population.[THR, 2019 and , Mavalankar, 2016] Even after seven decades of independence, India is finding it difficult to bridge the gap that exists between tribal and non-tribal population in regards to healthcare. They account for over a quarter of the country's poorest people. Although these groups have seen considerable progress over the years, poverty among tribal groups declined by more than a third between 1983 and 2015 and nearly half the country's Scheduled Tribes population remains in poverty, due to their low starting point.

One third of the world's tribal and indigenous population, that is, over 104 million tribal people live in India (8.6%). Spread across 705 communities, they represent unique cultural diversity. Out of the total Schedule Tribe population, approximately 2.6 million (2.5%) belong to "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups" (PVTGs) known as the "Primitive Tribes." This classification is reserved for the most disadvantaged of all the Schedule Tribe communities. There are 75 identified PVTGs spread across 18 States and Union Territories in India. There are 90 districts or 809 blocks with > 50% tribal population and they account for 45% of Schedule Tribe population. Paraphrasing it infers that 55% are outside Scheduled areas (Bhatiya, 2017)

The Andamanese and Nicobarese can be split into two broad tribal groups mainly based on their place of origin. The **Andaman Islands are home to four 'Negrito' tribes were as – the Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, and Sentinelese**. Whereas the **Nicobar Islands are home to two 'Mongoloid' tribes – the Shompen and Nicobarese**. The Nicobarese, who are of Mongloid Stock are a large population of over 27,000. They are horticulturist and pig-herders inhabiting large permanent villages mostly close to sea shore. They are not divisible into tribes, but there are distinctions, chiefly territorial. Thus they may be fairly divided into six groups : the people of Car Nicobar, Chowra, Teressa with Bompoka, the Central Group, the Southern Group and the single inland tribe of the Shompen on Great Nicobar. The differences to be observed

is language, customs, manners and physiognomy of the several groups may, with some confidence, be referred to habitat and the physical difficulties of communication. (Prasad, 2010)

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an archipelago located in the South-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal, were devastated by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami on 26 December 2004. Official reports mention more than 3500 persons as dead or missing, unofficial estimates put the figure far higher. The government reconstruction programme to replace nearly 10,000 homes that were destroyed has thrown up many important issues. Major concerns voiced by communities include the design, location and cost of proposed housing and the lack of scope for them to be involved in the process (Rawal, et.al, 2006)

Though there are many comparable cultural traits, the Nicobarese of different islands exhibit distinct features in terms of geographical nomenclature, language, material culture, seasonal or lineage related ceremonies, and folklore, etc. Furthermore every village and lineage group in each island had its own identity and it is manifested during village and lineage related festivals. The rich cultural heritage and knowledge is maintained through the various cultural practices of the Nicobarese of each island and it is exhibited on different occasions. Similarly Katchal Island has its own identity in terms of traditional huts, material culture, folklore, myths, and kinship terminologies, etc. The earthquake and tsunami in 2004 has had impact not only on the human lives but also on material culture. Soon after this tragedy, the islands are inundated with many developmental programmes with the initiation of international and national voluntary agencies and government in the name of rehabilitation and resettlement. But these efforts caused mixed reaction and had impact of the traditional knowledge of the Nicobarese. (Prasad 2016)

Objective

The present paper attempts to highlight the significance of traditional housing pattern of Nicobar tribes and their rehabilitation of the lives of the Nicobarese and the consequences of modern development in post tsunami. The study also attempted to know how the modern developmental housing has transformed the traditional housing of the natives and eventual impact on the loss of indigenous knowledge with development post tsunami.

Methodology

For collection of primary data the qualitative anthropological techniques are conceived as important for the study. These are mainly participant observation, case study, key informant interviews, group discussions, and non-formal interviews using a detailed checklist. Data from secondary sources such as books, articles, published reports, Census reports, and government documents have been collected. The study has been made in Nicobar island tracing the Nicobar tribes.

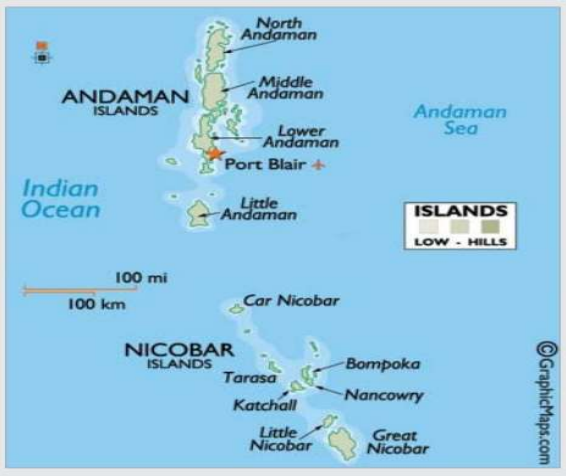


Figure 1 - Map of Nicobar Island

Population of Nicobar tribes in Nicobar Island

As per the census of India (2011) the tribal population accounted for 63.1% of the total population. The Nicobarese constitute the largest tribal group (97.25%) as per 2011 Census, (Source: Ministry of Tribal Welfare Affairs) who predominantly inhabit in Nicobare Group of Islands. They are advanced Mongoloid Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Island. So, for carrying out the study Nicobare Island was traced and selected. In Nicobare Island, 3 villages namely Perka village, Mus village and Big Lapati village are found to have large number of Nicobare tribes.

Ethnographic Background of the Nicobarese:

The Nicobarese of Nicobar Island belongs to Mongoloid stock and they are listed as one of the Scheduled Tribes of India. The Nicobarese of all these islands are similar in physical appearance, food habits, and other material and non-material cultural traits. But each island has its own identity in terms of origin folktales, language, material traits, and island specific rituals. They generally speak the Nicobar dialect for communication within family and kin groups. All the Nicobarese understand and follow the written script of Car Nicobarese language. Besides this, Hindi is widely spoken with outsiders. However, Urdu and Gujarati also conversed by few Nicobarese who converted to Islam.

Dressing style of Nicobar tribes

Now-a-days the traditional dress ngong (petticoat) and kisat or ning (loin cloth) are being replaced by modern clothes. But the traditional dress i.e., loincloth is worn on during ritual occasions and it is customary for magico-religious practitioner. The present dress pattern of women i.e., lungi or sarong and a blouse, resembles the dress pattern of Burmese, Karen or Malay women. Among the Nicobarese Muslims, the men wear pyjama and round cap and women wear Lungi and blouse along with head scarf.

Food Pattern of the Niocbar tribes

The Nicobarese are non-vegetarian and they eat fish, mutton, beef, pork and chicken. Their traditional vegetable foods are pandanus, yam, banana, coconut and wild roots, tubers. Further they also consume rice and pulses with the contact of non-tribes. Pork is their staple food and it is a religious taboo for Nicobarese Muslims. However it is observed that rearing of chuok's piggery still practiced and the pigs are freely roaming in Muslim households too. Further certain foods are prohibited for women during their life-cycle rituals and these restrictions were followed irrespective of their religious faith.

Social organization of Nicobar tribes

The social organization of Nicobarese could be understood from its maximal lineage system as it facilitates socio-economic integrity of its members. It is popularly known as tuhet in Car Nicobar and chuok in Central Nicobar. However, tuhet is more popular in the entire Nicobar Islands. Earlier it is the joint family who take care of its members in the chuok. The tendencies of nuclear family are emerging with the inter-religious marriages. Monogamy is the social norm among the Nicobarese, whereas rule of residence is bi-local in nature depending on the need of the members in the chuok and family. As a rule, marriage is not permitted among the consanguineous kins. Marriages within a chuok or kinem is allowed but provided they are not related consanguineously for at least below three generations. The custom of bride-price is prevalent in Chowra and Terressa islands only and rarely observed in other islands. Though divorce is allowed, it is discouraged by their chachah (traditional Village Council). Remarriage is permitted among the Nicobarese. The frequency of inter-island and inter religious marriages are more in the study area when compared to other Nicobar Islands. Cultivation of coconut, areca nut and other horticultural crops is a main economic activity besides fishing, and pig herding. Apart from this, they do engage in making cane and bamboo baskets, canoes, wooden or iron spears. Inter-island exchange is a marked feature of the Nicobarese society which facilitates them to obtain scarce resources. The Island Council consists of Chief Captain and Vice Chief Captain, Secretary and members who are the Captains of all the villages of that particular island regulate the behaviour of Nicobarese and settle the disputes. In turn each village consists of village Council which consists of five captains who administer the activities in the village. Further each lineage is headed by one head who is known as ma-ku-tuhet also taken into consideration

for council meetings by the Captains. They are in turn responsible for controlling their own group and assist village headman as and when required.

Though majority of them converted to new religious faith i.e., Christianity, and Islam still they believe in the animistic powers i.e., kareava (fetish of human and animal figurine) and hentukui (a fetish wooden board consists of sketches of their habitat and ecology) and hence appease both malevolent and benevolent spirits during ceremonial occasions. Observance of elaborate ancestral and spirit worship, magico-religious practices, and seasonal festival were part of their belief system and it is strictly followed by all the Nicobarese.

Impact of Tsunami and Earthquake:

In December 2004, an earthquake occurred just off the coast of Indonesia, causing a tsunami which damaged a number of islands in the Indian ocean. The Nicobar group of islands was one of the worst affected by the tsunami, since they lie 1,192 km to the north of Sumatra, Indonesia (Singh et al., 2016); being the closest Indian territory to the epicenter of the earthquake of a magnitude of 9.3 (Simron Singh, 2009). The destruction affected more than half of the mangrove forests, 40% of the coral reefs, 97% of the mangrove cover and more than 3900 ha of agricultural land (Nehru & Balasubramanian, 2018). The tsunami destroyed a large part of the Nicobarese' land, and in its aftermath the islanders received national relief in the form of post-disaster aid from the Indian government (Saini, 2018; Simron Singh & Haas, 2016). It was in this period of relief and aid that the Nicobarese were displaced from their homes along the coast, and relocated in the island interiors alongside the settler communities in revenue towns such as Campbell Bay. Bureaucratic and institutional complexities caused these resettlements which were initially meant to be temporary, to last until the present date due to lack of permission to move back to their original settlements.

Rehabilitation and Resettlement:

Keeping in view of the exigency, immediate relief was initiated to provide temporary relief to the affected Nicobarese with the active co-operation of Non-Government Organizations. As a part of financial package, government has provided one lakh rupees each to those who expired as well as missing persons and made a provision of Rs. 3000/- available as temporary relief for all the affected families. Besides this, Andaman and Nicobar administration taken up the immediate relief works like supply of tents for temporary shelter, solar equipped lighting and phones, ration, vegetables, clothe, medicine, electric generators, farming implements and tools, household kits, etc. All the villages shifted their habitation from their original settlement to new location in the elevated areas of their horticultural plantations. Soon after the tragic incident, the relief was reached very lately to since the Jetty is washed out in tsunami waves. Nicobarese took immediate shelter in their plantation houses in tavat area (place inside the forest where they practice shifting horticulture) where traditional huts were built on stilts. Since the water is contaminated, they survived on the left over coconuts. Slowly they started clearing the new location after arriving consensus.

The choice of selection new plot or location is purely based on their traditional knowledge on availability of water in the form of well (Kuva) and streams (Nallas). The present new location also resembles to earlier tuhet pattern i.e., construction of tin made intermediate shelters in clusters of their respective tuhet areas. Majority of the temporary habitats are constructed near. Even some of the tuhet people are adjusted temporarily in the neighboring ones where horticulture resources were intact. It is based on their traditional way of sharing resources under Sinyounglose and Misang (cooperation). Since the traditional houses are washed out in giant tsunami waves, temporary shelters were made with iron and cement floor. But, in due course these temporary shelters are replaced by pucca houses those resemble urban model. But it took almost four to five years to complete the pucca houses due to scarcity of raw material, inclement weather conditions, and

remote location. The resettlement of Nicobarese in new locations has had repercussions on the rearing of livestock.

Figure 2

Traditional House pattern of Nicobar tribes pre-Tsunami

Source: Thangaraji et.al, 2015

Structure of traditional housing of nocobar island were given below

Roofing: Thatch on timber understructure and sometimes CGI roof on timber infrastructure

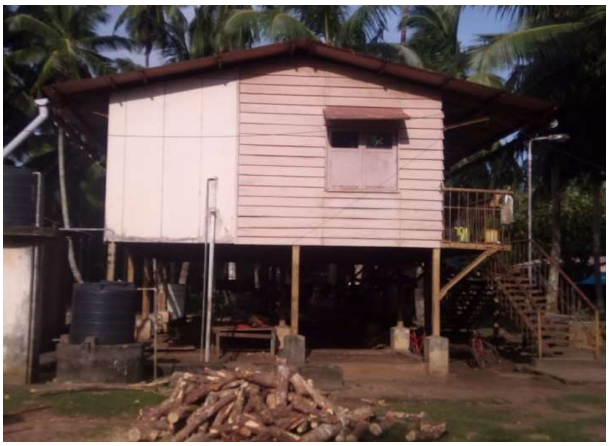
Walling: Stilted house on timber or masonry posts. For walling, timber planks or bamboo mats mounted on wood posts. In typical Nicobar hut, semispherical thatch roof covering the side walls also.

Flooring: ventilated flooring with bamboo or timber.

The traditional houses having stilt platform had the facility of leaving the unused food to their piggery and fowls. But it is missing in the newly constructed pucca houses. The traditional headmen house in the form of elongated pole accompanied by Nyihipool (Gholghar or beehive hut) for celebration of lineage related rituals, ceremonies, decision making and merry making, etc., is pivotal in the village. The guests from other island either Nicobarese or non-tribes are given accommodation in such community hut temporarily. During celebration of events, all the lineage members gather at Nyihipool and perform the ceremonial events. But this identity of headman house and other tuhet (lineage) headmen are lost due to similar housing pattern for all the Nicobarese. However, the pucca houses lack enough space for cultural/creative activities during ritual and ceremonial occasions as it is much more in their traditional village pattern. To overcome this problem, Nicobarese already built traditional houses nearer to their horticultural plot by using their knowledge of local raw materials and techniques. Construction of roads and other civic infrastructure facilities like school, community hall, delivery and mortuary houses, medical sub-center, anganwadi center, fair-price shops are undertaken by the administration after tsunami. But prior to building the permanent infrastructure facilities, Nicobarese had already built the pathways, sanitation pits, and wells, etc., in their temporary shelters by using their indigenous knowledge. The power supply is worse affected and people depend on the diesel operated motors during nights. Till the relocation of power supply i.e., arrangement of new poles, transformers to the new location, they depended on traditional coconut torches for movement in night as it is extensively used for fishing in night. The undue delay in construction of permanent pucca houses in Katchal may be attributed to nonavailability of construction material i.e., sand, iron and hallow bricks. Since, the building material is not available locally and lack of expertise; they are facing the problem of minor or major repairs during heavy.

Government House structure- Post Tsunami

Post tsunami the government has made intervention programme for the households of Nicobar tribes as most of the habitation were washed out with the tsunami wave. The house pattern were introduced to preserve them from future disaster issues. The following images shows the houses built by the government for the tribes,



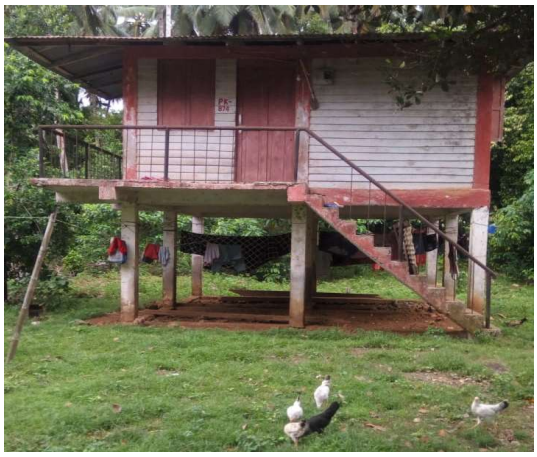


Figure 3

Government House pattern of Nicobar tribes Post- Tsunami

The Structure and the materials used in the house constructed by government after tsunami were given below

Roofing: Corrugated AC sheeting on timber understructure and RCC slab for the ground floor if there is more than one floor.

Walling: a) RC frame from foundation to roof level with wall infill made of 100x200x400 concrete blocks b) Concrete blocks up to sill level and timber planks on wood posts that are anchored to MS angles embedded into concrete.

Flooring: Cement flooring but sometimes tiles also used.

Timber: For many years the people who were brought in by the government to settle down or the so-called 'settlers' were given 12 tons or 17 cu.m of timber to construct their houses, and later given up to 6 cu.m. For repair and maintenance every five years. This practice was stopped many years back. However, the timber required for the construction needs of all the communities can be accessed from the Government-owned saw mill at Chatham Saw Mill in Port Blair. Tribal communities continue to access the timber from forest as and when needed. The Supreme Court has barred timber extraction only for commercial purposes but communities can get it for their needs through the Government.

Aggregates: This is generally brought from the quarries of South Andaman. This stone, however, is not considered hard enough, and hence, at times this too is brought from the mainland. It has also been reported that the dead coral found on islands is used at times in place of aggregates. The Port Blair aggregates cost Rs600/cu.m. Locally while they cost approx. Rs4,800/cu.m. In Campbell Bay. Sand:Sand from the beaches (Rs800/cu.m.) has been used for most cement-based construction. This sand contains salt as well as a high percentage of calcium carbonate from shells. Since both are detrimental to the strength of the structure, at times river sand was brought from the mainland. However, river sand costs Rs8000/cu.m. Which is more than the aggregates brought from Port Blair. Hence, stone dust for Rs5,600/cu.m. From the quarries on South Andaman is preferred. For plastering, this is sieved, whereas for concrete it is used as it is. The locals have been using the local sea sand with its high content of salt in house construction since the last 30 years. They have not experienced any rapid corrosion of steel which has been used in the RC construction. According to them the salinity of the sea in this region is less than that adjacent to the mainland. Also they claim that the strength of the cement-based construction is quite high. This is likely since in the absence of rigorous destructive testing such reduction in strength is difficult to assess by common people. In recent years, however, taking cognisance of these facts and of the possibility of low strengths, instead of 1:2:4 proportions for concrete, people have adopted 1:11/2:3, and instead of 1:6 proportion for cement mortar, 1:4 has been adopted.

Roofing Sheets: These are obtained from Port Blair. Since AC sheets experience breakage up to 10 to 15%, CGI sheets are preferred by the people. APWD is also going to replace AC sheets by the CGI sheets in its future specifications.

Cement & Steel: Obtained from Port Blair, these come from mainland. Therefore, transportation costs are very high. At Campbell Bay, cement costs Rs350/bag and steel Rs35/kg respectively.

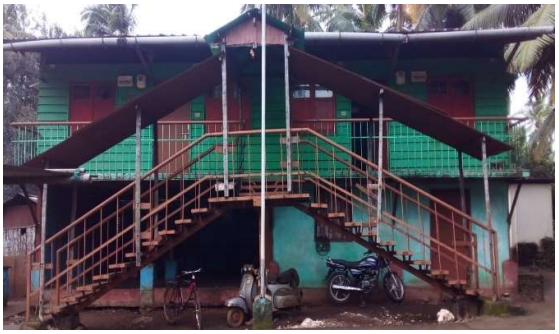
Water Supply: Most houses had access to open dug wells for water. Since it rains seven to eight months in a year, the wells have adequate water. Interestingly, shallow wells, within 100ft of the sea yield fresh water at a shallow depth in most settlements. Hence, piped water was not a necessity.

Rainwater harvesting: Before tsunami the people were aware about rainwater harvesting but it was not really practised, even though it has great potential. In public buildings rainwater harvesting tanks were constructed prior to tsunami. But in most places this system is found lying unused. Since tsunami, however, with the traditional water sources beyond reach in the interim shelters and centralised water supply being unreliable, the usefulness of roof rainwater harvesting has been experienced and appreciated by all. This is evident in the extensive presence of the system improvised by every household in front or rear of the interim shelters.

Development in housing pattern

With development of the Nicobar tribes they were found to have advancement in the house built by the government to meet their population growth. the following images depicts the development made in the habitation of the tribal group.

Figure 4



Developed House Structure and Tuhet Housing Structure

Roofing: The roofing of the Nicobar tribes had undergone drastic stage where their roofing was made of fiber sheet and very less number of the houses were found to be of leaf/coconut leaf roofing.

Wall: the walls of the Nicobar tribes were made of wood, cement and bamboo.

Floor: the flooring of the houses were found to be of cement finishing or tiles and few houses were found to be having wooden walls.

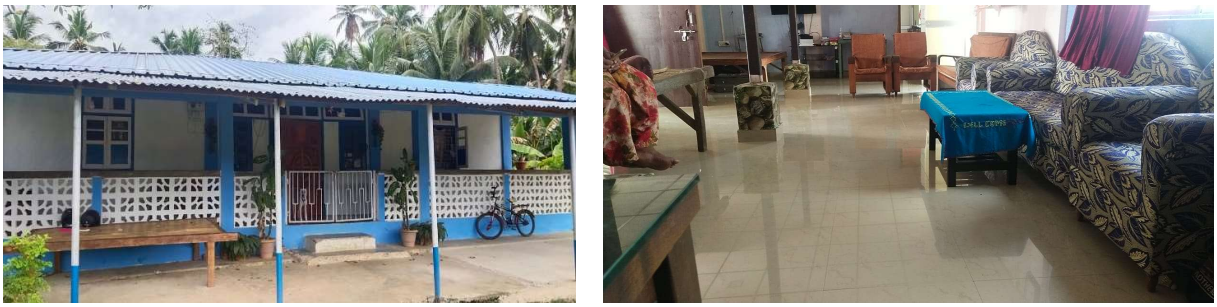
Rooms: As the Nicobar tribes were preferring to live in joint family system most of them were found to have nearly 50 members in one family due to which they had issues in number of rooms so they started following `Tuhet` housing pattern.

Recent Development in the habitation

As the modernization hit the Nicobar tribes, now they are found to have developed housing structure meeting all their requirements. Since nearly 50 members were residing in single house the houses of the tribal were found to be have reduces the spaces for their pet animals and started making up rooms to meet up their issues. The recent development of the tribes were seen through their education, employment and communication with non-tribal communities. They were also found to be having technology advancement like Television, internet

facilities, telecommunication facilities and media coverages. They were also having labour friendly devices like mixer, grinder, washing machine, fan, and others.

Figure 5



Development of Housing Structure

Here, it can be identified that since the tribes are found to be developing now they have avoided leaving spaces for their pet animal and started building their houses occupying full space.

Conclusion

From the above data it is clear that though developmental efforts are undertaken in massive way to tide over the crisis, the inclement weather conditions, lack of supply of raw material, geographical isolation, lack of skill and technology, and so on led to undue delay in resettlement. However this crisis is overcome with the social institutions and traditional knowledge of the Nicobarese which facilitated them to adapt to the problems posed by the disaster. The knowledge of various forest resources and the island eco-system facilitating the Nicobarese in coping the crisis is being felicitated with their traditional knowledge and inbuilt institutional framework. Most of the Nicobar tribes are moving towards their development and have come out from their indigenous nature. When the government programmes and policies reaches them they are utilizing the program for their development in positive way. With growing years, the Nicobar tribes will have full development and will be able to live in the same lifestyle as like non tribal community. they are also found to be united in their nature as even with most of the development they are residing in joint family system and having their family tie ups adequately.

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