



**Besieged Memories: A Study of Hansda Sowendra
Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey***
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Abstract

Literature is one of the most powerful symbolic modes through which memory is contested, transmitted, and stored. Memory is no longer considered an individual or private domain but has formulated new social dimensions which manifest themselves through the collective of a group. In a nation's narrative, memory is a trope that foregrounds the polyphonic voices of the nation. Cultural Memory Studies is an offshoot of Memory Studies, an academic field of research that studies the use of memory as a tool for remembering the past. An interdisciplinary field, it cuts across diverse areas like historiography, psychology, cultural studies, sociology anthropology, etc. This paper titled Analysing Besieged Memories in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, probes the novel to find multiple modes of memory used to foreground the past. The selected novel unravel mysteries and rediscover elided potentials of cultures, suppressed by colonial regimes. The author's proud emphatic narrative reiterates a belief in traditional systems and voices a caution against future coercive measures. The writer is a social activist, an author of children's fiction and is a politically vigilant person. Both Shekhar and the text together represent the largest indigenous community in India - the Santhals who have mostly remained outside the articulatory spaces of history. Innovative strategies identified in a quest for identity and social belonging stimulate this study. The novel subverts fixed object positions and relocates the members of the community as subjects, who are culturally intelligible and socially sustainable. The paper identifies the subversion of documented history and retracing of indigenous memory as two strategies that have received least attention in academic deliberations. When fourth world writers equipped with first-hand knowledge of land and social history write, hitherto,

silenced aboriginal stories surface. Furthering research in the area Jan Assmann's term cultural memory concentrate on those historical experiences that change ideas and redefine cultures. It includes communicative memories which are socially mediated and cultural memories which have fixed points in the past. When these are applied as a tools, divergent memories and strategies emerge enabling the select text to be identified as a collective text capable relocating besieged memories and thereby validates the presence of the select community in the enlarged macrocosm - the nation.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Cycle of Mimesis, Cultural Memory, Native Literature

I

Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, an award-winning work, unravels mysteries and rediscovers elided potentials of tribal culture of Jharkhand, suppressed by colonial regimes and hegemonic narratives of nation. The novel is read here as a novel of resistance that articulates the unvoiced memories of the Santhal community. In an interview with Dibyajyoti Sarma, Shekhar discloses: "The fact that I am an insider helps me because I am writing about Santhals, and being a Santhal myself I know that my observations are first-hand and have some degree of authenticity in them" ("An Interview"). The Baskey family is the microcosm of the larger state of Jharkhand. Unstable economy, illiteracy, exploitation of natural resources, establishment of mines, and poor health conditions are some common factors cited for the poor performance of tribal communities. Shekhar weaves in all these issues by cleverly manoeuvring the plot and characters of his novel.

The Santhals form a major section among the tribal population of India. Predominantly settled in Odisha, a separate state was assigned only in 2000. During colonial rule, the tribals were marginalised and relegated to the status of labourers, subsequently leading to localised resistances. Almost hundred years before India's First War of Independence (1857), tribes of

the present-day Jharkhand were reportedly engaged in a series of armed struggles to liberate their land from colonial rule. The Chhota Nagpur region was ceded to the British Empire in 1867 before which a major section of Adivasis led a self-sustained life in the forests of North-East India. The period of Ho rebellion (1803-33) indicates the continuous protest of natives against colonial policies. The combined Adivasi rebellion, the Kol Uprising of 1831- 33, was later suppressed by the British army in 1836, is recorded in many historical documents related to the period. Even today, the people of Jharkhand remember their tribal leaders like Tika Majhi, who led the first revolt, and other heroes such as Sidho Kanhu, Birsa Munda, and Kana Bhagat with pride and reverence. After Independence, the Adivasi Mahasabha was formed to voice *adivasi* problems. Unfortunately, tribal literature from India has failed to find due recognition and place.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar integrates the socio-historical aspirations of the Santhals in the form of a novel. The fictional Kadamdihi, in *Mysterious*, has been modelled on Kishoripur in the Chakulia block of Jharkhand's East Singhbhum district, the ancestral place of Shekhar. The titular heroine, Rupī Baskey, is introduced to the readers as the strongest woman of Kadamdihi. The chapter titled "The Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi" reveals that Rupī is not in control of her destiny. Shekhar writes: "Helplessness, regret and anger race across her face. Helplessness – for things are entirely out of control" (*Mysterious* 8). She is crippled by her disease: "Rupī's disease isn't hers alone. It is Putki's, it is Sido's, Doso's and Dulari's" (9). The hardships that Rupī's family encounter are symbolic representations of the trials and tribulations faced by the people/state of Jharkhand in its struggle for independence and its demand for a separate state.

The novel ends with the chapter titled "The Cure? Well, Almost" which indicates an incomplete healing. The evolving character of Rupī can be read as a metaphor for the present state of affairs in Jharkhand. On reading the interviews given by

Shekhar, it is evident that a major share of inputs for the novel is based on real characters and incidents Shekhar encountered first hand in his neighbourhood. Shekhar's debut novel has succeeded in reconfiguring the Santhal freedom struggle, a movement that began even before the other parts of India thought of freedom. Santhal protests were against discriminating land policies and unequal wages at workplaces run by the British rulers.

The plot of *Mysterious* can be divided into two sections – pre-Independence and post-Independence period. In the novel, various tribes can be seen clamouring for Independence. Along with the Santhals, other tribes like Kamar, Mahlay and Munda are also mentioned in the novel. The Santhals have coexisted amicably with these tribes for centuries. In the novel, the Santhals are portrayed as rich and content in their own ways. Among the local chieftains, Somai-haram, the *majhi* of Kadamdihi “deposited the largest quantity of rice with the raja of Dhalbhumgarh” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 23). Dal kings are referred to again in the novel. This shows the tribe's close association with the centres of power. The royal family referred to is a historically verifiable trace that adds authenticity to the fictional characters portrayed in the novel.

The rulers of Dhalbhum Raj were forerunners in India's freedom struggle. In 1769-74 Raja of Dhalbhum rebelled against East India Company which is called Dhalbhum Uprising followed by the Chuar Rebellion in 1799. Raja of Dhalbhum with a force of 1500 soldiers along with the Raja of Jhargram rebelled against East India Company whose forces were led by Lieutenant Fergusson who assaulted the forts of Dhalbhum and Jhargram. (Rathore)

Somai-haram's connections with the king made the Santhals of Kadamdihi more powerful than the Santhals of other regions. Even after his death, Somai-haram is remembered with awe and respect. This affection is extended even to his

grandchildren and great-grandchildren by the community. Khorda, the son-in-law of Somai-haram, also enjoys a similar stature in the society though he was lame and a “ghar-jamai” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 17).

The Chakuliya Township and the adjacent railway station connect the Santhals to other cities. It is here that Putki first hears of the country’s freedom struggle, about their leader Jaipal Singh and the formation of “the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938 which demanded a separate state called Jharkhand for the Adivasis of the Chota Nagpur region” (49). Shekhar also informs that “The Adivasi Mahasabha was renamed the Jharkhand Party after independence” (49). Santhals are not familiar with Gandhi or Nehru as their National leaders. “They said that the Ingrej had left and that the sarkaar would be run by our own people ... the prospect of a separate land for the people, for the Adivasis” (48) is what loomed large in the adivasi minds.

The plot also sets aside space to describe Jaipal Singh– his origins, his education, his 1928 gold winning Olympics performance, in the Indian hockey team, in particular. Shekhar also informs how Jaipal Singh is affectionately called “Marang-Gomkay– the Big Gentleman” by his followers (*Mysterious* 49). The portrayal of this real-life leader (1903-1970) who formed the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938, aids in placing the text in a specific historical context. A few lines from the Santhal national anthem in both Santali and in translation are added in the story. It reverberates with hopes of unifying Santhals, Mahlay and Munda tribal communities. This demand for unification is a rare political occurrence where three adivasi tribes demand a single independent state.

Khorda who marries Putki is well-versed in the genealogy of the tribes of the region and is also “aware of what was happening in the world around him” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 70). In 1952 when Indian elections were in sight “he motivated the people of Lowadihi and Kadamdihi to vote in the elections ...

told them about Jaipal and the Jharkhand Party... the massacre of Ho and the Santhal demonstrators in Kharsawan in 1948, in which more than a thousand Adivasis were killed” (70). Khorda’s omission of the usual traces of Indian freedom struggle, like the first war of Indian Independence, the Sepoy Mutiny, the Jallianwala Bhagh massacre, etc. that are usually highlighted to evoke nationalism, is here a significant lapse. It is interesting to note that Khilafat Movement, a revolt against the mistreatment meted out to Muslim Caliphate in Turkey, finds an important place in Indian history whereas the Ho rebellion by Adivasis against the British, is conspicuously absent in many history textbooks. The novel employs a new set of historical traces usually given the least prominence by dominant discourses.

The Santhals had their own leaders and aspirations. They asked: “We are living in a free country now. Don’t we have the right to demand what is good for us?” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 71). This “us” stands for adivasis and not Indians. As Hayden White claims: “We give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories. And so too with our nations and whole cultures” (“Historical” 228). In a similar vein, Shekhar here tries to assemble the story of his tribe’s aspiration for freedom and self-respect, by re-emplotting the Indian freedom struggle from a Santhal perspective. Shekhar narrates a list of turning points in the political history of Jharkhand culminating with the merger of “the Jaipal Singh led faction of the Jharkhand Party ... controversially with the Indian National Congress at the behest of Jawaharlal Nehru” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 72). The narrator declares that history is created at three junctures in the local context. Firstly, “Putki ... voted in the first general elections of the country and became part of history” (71). Secondly, the entire people at the behest of local leaders like Khorda voted unanimously for the “proud rooster” symbol (71). And finally, when the Jharkhand party won both the seats it contested. Both made history by becoming members of the first-ever Bihar Vidhan Sabha of independent India.

The narrator is again specific when he says “the Jharkhand Party created history also by becoming the chief opposition” in the state (71). These traces are emplotted to foreground Santhal regional history. Shekhar has used fiction to return to specific historical junctures during the Indian freedom struggle. He then views it anew from a Santhal perspective. This passion and hope for a separate state is later slashed by hasty, selfish and politically motivated decisions by the men in power. To illustrate the effect of these decisions, the narrator concludes the chapter with the following description: “Somai-haram died peacefully. Young Sido poured water into his mouth from a sarjom-leaf bowl while little Doso stared curiously at the mournful looks on everyone’s faces” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 72). The people felt misled and betrayed but their lives continued. In their uncertainties they failed to create a space for themselves. On reading such history-fictions, specific social milieus are perceived with a greater understanding of native thoughts and aspirations. Shekhar weaves history into fiction through fictionalised stories of common men and women.

The next elections come and a new man comes in the picture, namely Surya Singh Besra, “a self-appointed revolutionary” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 147). Everyone in the region knows him. He rises to power as a student leader of AJSU (All Jharkhand Students Union). This party leads people to believe that the old leaders are giving in and they demanded radical measures to reserve Jharkhand for the adivasis alone. Shekhar’s critical mindset is revealed when he says: “AJSU could achieve only two things,” first they crippled the area with frequent bandhs and secondly they brainwashed the youth into believing that the struggle for a separate state of Jharkhand was more important than education (147). “These young men set fire to their educational certificates, thus putting their future at stake, and jumped into the fray” (147). At the other end “Besra wins the Bihar Assembly elections as an independent candidate” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 147). His political symbol is that of the rising sun. But the hopes of adivasis, for a new dawn,

were ironically setting. This fear and foresight are evident in Khorda-haram's reminiscence:

He did occasionally reminisce about the past, the sacrifices of so many Adivasis, so that a separate state of Jharkhand could be created. How they had all voted so excitedly in the 1952 and 1957 Bihar Assembly elections and how the Jharkhand Party had won But then, there had been the humiliating merger of the Jharkhand Party with the Congress and how Jaipal Singh ... faded into oblivion. Khorda wondered if the new parties were any good. (147-8)

Factually this merger happened in 1963. This political farce is a cause behind the poor performance of all the three sons of Rupai, the symbolic representative of Jharkhand. Her husband Sido, following the footsteps of a more rooted grand father Somai-haram and father Khorda-haram, acclimatised and is portrayed as a respected teacher and scholar who holds a government job. But Rupai's sons, Jaipal, Doso and Phuchu fall victim to the powers of two Dahnis, two women who take control over their life with black magic. "That Phuchu ... he was so clever ... he looks like an imbecile. It's the effect of the Gurubari's magic" says neighbours in hushed voices (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 182). More than factual history, the novel is keen on demonstrating the impact of socio-cultural dimension of historical incidents on the people.

Rupai's family is the microcosm of Jharkhand society. The belief in the Dahni represents the evil forces in society that suck the vital energy required for progress of adivasis. The trauma that Santhals go through as a result of the insults and discriminations resonates through Rupai, who represents the othered citizens. With the arrival of Rupali, Bishu's bride, Rupai's condition starts improving. Rupali instils a renewed vigour in the family. Rupai begins to have dreams of a happy family where situations are under control: "Rupai smiles, her face peaceful, her body free of suffering, and lies on the parkom

under the dogor tree thinking: Just like me, just like me” (208). Rupali is an image of Rupi from her younger days, strong and sure of herself. The text reads as a metaphor, inducing parallel imagination which forces the reader to correlate Rupi’s condition and the progress of the state of Jharkhand, in a new light. The dates, the names of leaders, the revolts mentioned are faithful to history but Kadamdihi is a fictional space. Generally, readers tend to rely on history texts because of its truth claim. But the above identified traces force a change in perspective. “One sees different things” because the choices of the Santhal writers are different (Ricoeur, *Memory* 212).

Hayden White, in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” maintains that while emplotting a set of events (e.g., a, b, c, d, e... n), the historians privilege the “status given to certain events” (230). The choice of event, characters, milieu, etc., depend on the ideology and social consciousness of the author. In the texts taken up for study, history and memory are used as tropes. The events emplotted are “endowed with new meanings without violating ... chronological arrangements” (230).

1. A, b, c, d, e, ..., n (1)
 2. a, B, c, d, e, . . ., n (2)
 3. a, b, C, d, e, . . ., n (3)
 4. a, b, c, D, e, . . ., n. (4)
- (“Historical” 230)

When a native novelist gives privilege to certain events or ideas, they are foregrounded in the fictional narrative. The ways in which Shekhar reconstructs and represents events of history create new combinations which are appreciative of the native group identities.

II

Multiple modes of memory are used to recall the past. Jan Assmann says: “Culture is not transmitted as a result of phylogenetic evolution but rather a result of socialisations and customs” (“Collective” 125). Socialisation concretises group

identities. The theorists propose two types of social memory—communicative and cultural memory. While collective or communicative memories are short-term memories, cultural memory connects a group to its distant past. The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian. The demand for history has, thus, largely overflowed the circle of professional historians. Those who have long been marginalised in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity.

Our stories depend on inputs from our immediate family members and often, in narratives, the elderly characters serve as reservoirs out of which stories, customs and references to mnemonic devices emerge. Circulation of such knowledge through social interactions reinforce collective identity. These intra-community communications reveal the reach and vitality of aboriginal collective memories. In *Mysterious*, the trials and tribulations of the Baskey family are witnessed by the villagers of Kadamdihi: “Each episode in their lives has played out in full view of Kadamdihi, even as the village has speculated about them, cheered them on, lamented their fate and, most of all, enjoyed the show” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 9). All the immediate family members of Somai-haram’s family are dysfunctional, but they add to their family saga in one way or the other. Putki is the chief source of inter-generational memory transfer in *Mysterious*.

She is old, a drunkard and a nuisance to the community. But even in her drunken babblings, myths and traditional songs praising the community flow uninterruptedly. Through her ramblings, her stories of life dribble, educating others on the socio-political history of the community. Putki decides “to tell the story of Kadamdihi through songs” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 11). Shekhar includes a few lines of her songs and its translation in the plot. Shekhar has also included translation of songs sung

by other characters. Recollection of folk songs praising the community helps in restoring the lost pride of the aboriginals. Songs connect bygone generations and generations to come to the present generation. Those who know the songs automatically merge with the community and their identity is fostered. This adds more charm and authenticity to the native milieu being described.

Aalay bargay ray ma, kocha bargay ray ma
Kfadam mulin baha poroi-poroi
In our garden, our corner garden
Look! The Kadam flowers have blossomed. (11)

Kadamdihi was named after the kadam tree. No kadam trees are to be found in Kadamdihi anymore, but Putki recalls that “there were ... there is no disputing Putki’s claim on her father’s authority If Somai-haram claimed to have seen kadam trees in Kadamdihi, then there must have been” (10). *Mysterious* is the story of four generations of Somai-haram’s family – Somai-budhi, Putki, Rup and Rupali. Putki and Rup are allotted the largest narrative space. Putki is Rup’s mother-in-law. Each story is incomplete without referring to stories that went before and stories that come after. Shekhar tells the story from the perspective of women. The men hold powerful positions in the novel but the story centres around women. It is not because they are more powerful than men, but because they are more active transmitters of memory. Shekhar’s ideas are revealed in his interview with Monideepa Sahu:

That did not happen consciously. In fact, I don’t see my men as passive figures. The thing is, the women are very powerful. Too powerful, in fact. As such, what you say is right, that the men are relatively shadowy, if they are compared to the women. Otherwise the men, too, are quite strong at some places I was quite clear that women had to hold the centre stage...
(“It’s a Women”)

Putki is not Rupi's anchor but her antithesis. Putki's presence helps Rupi to assess her role in the community and make necessary modifications. Rupi wonders: "Why did women like Putki and Della, who belonged to prosperous families, ever need to work in a factory?" (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 86). Rupi imbibes social codes of conduct through her conversations with Putki. "'So what?' Putki had said. 'Can only dikus dress up well? Today we will show them how well-dressed a Santar bride can be'" (85). At other instances, Rupi is seen admonishing Putki for her indecent way of dressing, especially when Putki is under the influence of alcohol. The youthful escapades of Putki are not to be emulated. As Jan Assmann notes, collective memory "is characterised by high degree of non-specialised, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganisation" ("Collective" 126). All the characters discussed above are non-specialised transmitters. Roles assigned are swapped during the exchange of collective memory. Putki is the most vivid and vital living source of collective identity in Kadamdihi.

Jay Winter says: "Sites of memory are places where people affirm their faith that history has a meaning" (70). Kadamdihi in *Mysterious* is the epicentre of cultural activities in the Santhal community. The shrine in Kadamdihi is a site of cultural memory. Nora claims: "Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders— these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity" (12). It is from here the stories of their origins and identity begin. Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo are worshiped here from ancient times. Somai-haram the leader of Kadamdihi is seen offering "regular prayers to the deities" (24). Shekhar declares that the shrine "is the holiest spot in the jaher" (*Mysterious* 25). Santhals from other villages too visit this shrine. Rupi, even before her marriage, visits this site: "On some days, she visited the ancient shrine to Marang-Buru on the top of the hills" (2). Apart from the regular prayers by Somai-haram, "sacrifices are made during Baha— the spring festival— and Maak-Moray" (25). The text mentions: "During

Baha, chickens are sacrificed, while goats are offered during Maak-Moray. The meat of all sacrificed animals is cooked and distributed among the residents of the village” (25). These traditions have been maintained for centuries and reflect the tribe’s beliefs and customs.

Nitra, the mining town, is portrayed in complete contrast to Kadamdihi. Even during their factory working days, Della and Putki are heard discussing this city. It is now a place where Sido has a white-collar job, the symbol of his successful life. But it is also here that Rupi gets affected by a strange disease. In the description of Rupi’s first journey to Nitra, less relevant sites like the rice mill where Putki worked, the school Sido studied in, the over- bridge built during the Sino-Indian war in 1962, etc., are all crossed to reach the Mosaboni Mines. During their journey they pass the Subarnarekha River too which refreshes the collective unconscious in Rupi. She thinks: “The River of Gold. She had heard stories about it, about the gold nuggets in its bed” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 88). The traditional, god-fearing, naive mind-set of Rupi is signified here. Her journey from a site of cultural memory to that of an urban population unsettles her. Her subsequent illness and depression can be primarily assigned to this shift in location. Nitra is a fictional place like Kadamdihi, the centre of action in the novel. The reference to an “over bridge on the highway built during the Sino-Indian war of 1962,” the Subarnarekha River and the Rahka and Jadugoda mines give this township a reality effect (Shekhar 86). In fact, media reports from Jharkhand have reported killings, protests and agitations against mining companies from time to time.

The rulers (*majhi*) of Kadamdihi hold a very respectable position in the Santhal society. This entails them the responsibility of safeguarding the community’s cultural integrity. Somai-haram is seen paying regular homage to his tribal deities. Khorda Baskey was from Lowadihi, but he soon fills the void left by Somai-haram, his father-in-law, in Kadamdihi. He tries his best to keep the tribe united: “He was social, he knew the entire Karam-Binti – the story of the

brothers Karmu and Dharmu told on the night of Karma-Bonga, in which everyone stays up all night – and the protocol to be followed at the jaher, and was ever ready to help everyone” (Shekhar, *Mysterious* 70). He was aware of the political climate of his land and “told everyone the creation of Jharkhand was in the interest of the Adivasis” (71). He urged them to vote in the state election. During his last days he became sceptical about the men in power at the centre of the state. In spite of all struggles, the Santhal community is not benefitted as much as he had hoped for. The absence of a strong holder of cultural memory is one of the causes of trouble in Kadamdihi. The presence of the religious deity Marang Buru in the background, is the only other powerful unifying force in the novel.

Shekhar has relocated his community admirably through the novel which the paper considers as a collective text. Common people and their uneasy tryst with society mark the novel. It is a beginning of a process where native milieu, monuments, rituals, myths, priests, and leaders find centre stage. Astrid Erll in her essay “Reading Literature as Collective Texts” proposes:

Whenever a literary text prefigures, forms, structures and organises, even retrospectively alters, our ideas and images of the past, we have functionalised it as a collective text Many readers draw their mental images and ideas about historical epochs not from historiography, and not from canonical literature, but from a multitude of historical novels, romances and detective stories– from fictional texts they probably cannot remember in detail any more. Yet, generally speaking, every literary text can be functionalised as a collective text. (335)

Subsequent to the analysis of different manifestations of memory, it is evident that literature is indeed a medium of cultural memory. “Literary mimesis is therefore not simply a representation of reality, in fact, configuration is an active,

constructive process, a creation of reality ...” (Erll, *Memory* 154). This act of resistance initiates a re-introduction of pre-colonial structures and beliefs into the current discourses. For the oppressed people, such works recreate a reality effect that stimulates the spirit of resistance passed on from their ancestors.

Narratives are rarely neutral though many of them feign an appearance of neutrality. Socio-political currents of the past and the present society stimulate narrative re-figurations. Hence, the very act of writing novels is perceived as an act of defiance and resistance when performed by a native author. Though Rupi is found tangled and lost in her aboriginal world, confused and traumatised, as the novel ends, the characters realise their social inclusiveness which help them to redefine their identities. The characters emerge stronger, matured and rejuvenated by their journeys of self-assertion and discovery. Through his text Shekhar proves that imagination, explanations and representations help to counter prefixed realities circulated by dominant narratives. Native authors set trend to reflexive fiction that comment on appropriations of the past and ideologies of the present; in short, religious, political and cultural repercussions affecting the society are reflected upon. This process results in the creation of genealogies from below. Thus, from a discursive point of view, who gets the opportunity to write about whom, is very crucial and the writer taken up by this analysis has made an imprint of his community in the literary world.

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