The Curious Case of Indian Comics: The 'Birth' of Comics in India

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Abstract

Seeing Indian comics now and tracing the steps back to when it first officially announced its arrival the whole journey of comics in India has a curious dimension to it. In their narrative style and content the comics we have in the recent decades are quite different from the first official comics of the land. When we read them we do not see comics as being born on some eventful day, but comics as part of a tradition of bringing storytelling and indigenous art together that has long been there in India. What I shall seek to establish in this paper is that comics in India did not quite need to be born via the West; rather they are a continuation of a history that predates the Western comics.

Keywords: Comics; Indigenous art; Storytelling.

Comics in its first self-declared 'official' form began circulation in India as a Western import. When we study the rise of comics as comic books and comic strips in India it traces its Western origin from the King Features syndicated cartoons in *Indrajal Comics*. But it is very interesting to note that whereas comics saw its 'birth' in India via West, one cannot overlook the fact that much before comics came as cartoons, comics as a part of the long tradition of pictorial and sequential narrative in general and as a part of caricature painting in particular, has long been there in India. We need to note that in India much before Anant Pai brought comics per say, there already had been a long history of art and storytelling in the land known for its richness in varied forms of paintings, engravings, temple etchings and such. Although it is true that this long history had little influence on comics when they started circulating first through *Indrajal Comics*, but it is worth interrogating the course it charted. This is because with the long history of both art and storytelling in many forms it might have seemed more logical for the birth of comics in India to have had an altogether different and more indigenous beginning than the one it has. One of the reasons for this, as I shall go on to establish, was that comics in India at its inception was understood altogether differently. It took quite a few decades and a complete change of perspective to understand comics not just as thin 30 or 40 odd

paged printed book for children but as a potent medium, a medium that the comic has always been, that is, for telling tales of caricature and/or critique through pictures.

It would be then wise to pause and understand here what we are referring to as comics. The very word comics has been used here to refer to the whole oeuvre of pictorial narratives, which might or might not have figures which are cartoons, or might appear unrealistic or 'cartoony,' that is, I use comics here as a term to denote any form that uses images as a narrative medium. There is no harm confessing here that problem arises when one sets out to give a clear definition of the term, where one meaning leads to another, only bringing into its ambit a sea of possible creative products that can be referred to as comics. The term in its loose and generous sense can include works so disparate that it is quite impossible to find a common ground between them, to lay out its features and define. From a book to the prints on a t-shirt can be referred to by the common term comics. We often associate anything that evokes laughter or is not realistic in the portrayal of its subjects or is cartoony, to be comics, which it is not. A comic may not be comical in the limited sense we take it to be. If the term by itself tells us anything, it only does so about the medium it uses. Comics use images to tell stories- sketches, paintings, collages, traditional art forms, photographs, cartoons, anything which can be called a picture. Comics on the basis of their length and also in certain ways level of complexity and maturity are categorised as comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. However, having said this it is also true that comics can reveal different levels of complexity and maturity according to its reading. No comic is innocent, even the ones assigned as those for children with seeming simplicity of plot and representation has its own politics.

Now when we see comics in this larger sense, what do we find its history in India to be? Although comics as a self-declared and what can be more appropriately called 'official' comic book was begun much later in India with the *Phantom* series[1], comics as a narrative style, a medium used in Indian paintings and temple engravings telling all kinds of tales, from lives of the royalty to that of the general public, date far back in history. There has been a tradition of sequential pictorial art through the ages. Buddhist paintings[2], the walls of the Ajanta caves in India covered with paintings using themes from Jataka tales and the life of Gautama Buddha[3], the Deccani painting, the Chitrakathis of Paithan[4], the Phad painting[5] are to name just a few. Thus, the practice of narrating tales in various forms has always been there in the country known as the land of storytellers, much before the West started theorising about sequential-art and/or comics.

Of all the diverse traditions of storytelling I have chosen the Patua painting of West Bengal as a particular instance for some detailed mention while

discussing art used for narrative and art for caricature not because it the only instance or the earliest, but only because discussing all such art forms would be impossible within the scope of this study. Also since Patua painting has originated and flourished in a part of the world to which I belong, I have a little more direct access and information about it compared to other such forms. It is the bringing together of painting, narrative, caricature and social commentary in the various stages of Patua painting as it has been practiced in Bengal through generations, that makes it of particular interest in the context of comics as we now understand it. Patua painting is not just about painting it is about storytelling. Scroll paintings of the patuas tell stories, there is no written text within them; the patua expects to sit with his audience, and sing his tales to them while slowly unrolling his/her scrolls (Singh). It is the song and the painting that together make the *Patachitra*[6]. So where comics are seen today as bringing images and the written word together, the Patua painting had brought the image and the oral word[7] together long back. It is very difficult to trace the history and origin of patuas and their performance due to lack of written documents but if we presume a Bengali tradition of scroll performances to be constituted by particular actors (a specific cast), a body of stories narrated in a specific style and language, we might assume that this tradition was popular already in the sixteenth century, if not earlier (Hauser).

These paintings (also called *pats*) were only much later seen as artefacts in themselves, without the oral narrative performance, and it is then that emphasis was given on their pictorial quality per say. With changing times, limited audience, competitive market, and a struggle for survival Patua paintings started to diversify primarily in two ways. One way was to sever it from its oral element, to emphasise on its saleability as commodity of aesthetic and traditional value. These paintings or *pats* without the song story with it to explain became a piece of folk-art scroll just for framing and decoration for some but on the other hand a very basic form of sequential-pictorial narrative for those who could understand its merit as so. The other way was to widen the scope of its content catering to popular taste.

> In order to capture the interest of his jaded audience, the patua must innovate, exploring contemporary themes and novel sights which can keep up the flagging interest of his audience. Thus, for his traditional audience, the patua feels the need to compose new topical songs and devise scrolls that will illustrate them. These new scrolls are usually about contemporary events—often sensational, related to scandals and disasters—akin to the stuff that fills our newspapers. (Singh 62-3)

The catalyst for Patua painting's survival and the birth of its offshoot Kalighat *pat*[8] was also the arrival of the British and their socio-economic influence on India in particular. Without the introduction of exported products, urbanization and subsequent push back that became the Indian freedom movement, *Patachitra* may have remained a completely rural form, and its urban and innovative offshoot of Kalighat painting may never have existed (Jefferson).

The most significant way in which patuas adapted to urban culture was the change in subject matter of their *pats*. Despite its link with the famous Hindu temple, the Kalighat *pat* were diverse enough in their repertoire to include non- religious themes (P. Ghosh). They became relevant to the entire population by capturing current events while also participating in satirizing through caricature the upper class Bengali culture and raising critical questions about the effects of British on India (Jefferson). Two things, therefore, make these later *pats* significant in my discussion on the connection they might have with the later Indian comics- is their being sold as a commodity, and other is their offering critical tongue in cheek social commentary. While traditional patuas travelled from place to place, the Kalighat patuas settled in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and took advantage of a picture trade market. Whereas as traditional *pats*, were usually painted on cloth for durability, either square shaped or in scroll, and were used as visual aids in performance, Kalighat *pats* on the other hand were made on paper and were sold as souvenirs to pilgrims and other travellers near Kali temple (Slaughter).

In fourteenth century India when paper came to be used as an alternative to palm leaves in the making of manuscripts what resulted was also a change in the very style of painting as well. This history of painting on paper has a variegated history across India. There was a point in this history when painting coupled with printing. This led to easier printed mass re-production of art works that gained much popularity in nineteenth century India, and this undoubtedly could have been significant in the development of latter day comics in India. The first printing press arrived in 1556[9] and the following era of seventeenth century saw quite an active engagement in book printing on a large scale with increasing number of books being also printed in the local languages. What becomes of particular interest to me is the evolving painting, the visual language and the nuances of its multiple reproductions in the subcontinent. It is nineteenth century Bengal that draws particular attention in this respect. It was in nineteenth century Bengal that the indigenous printing and publishing industry really took off (A. Ghosh). Between 1767 and 1820, several artists from different countries visited India and eventually settled down at the capital of British India in Calcutta. Among

them were uncle and nephew William and Thomas Daniell who from 1786-88 published an album of etchings title *Twelve Views of Calcutta*[10]. Printed in monochrome and individually stained in coloured ink, this was the first example of single sheet printing on a large scale in India and it became the initial method of choice for replication of invaluable artworks. The first Indian artist to have printed illustration of engravings was artist Ramchand Roy. He illustrated the first two of the six illustrations of the book *Annadamangal*[11]. Published by Ganga Kishore Bhattacharya, a journalist, teacher and reformer, it was printed at the Ferris and Company press of Calcutta in 1816. Printing and publishing of lithographic illustrations then came much into vogue and several art studios and print presses were established across India in the late nineteenth century to meet the growing demand for single sheet art prints.

A study of the early printed works in India shows that illustrations had become an almost indispensable part of them. The plain printed pages were adorned with coloured prints from engravings on wood and metal plates. Anindita Ghosh observes how the text and the image came to be associated with each other at the time in the process of making copies of the manuscripts.

> The images followed traditional patterns of iconography, and often were faithful replicas of manuscript illustrations. Pictorial rhetoric was deployed to convey simple moralistic messages and religious instructions, or reinforce a familiar storyline. In either case the representations were only an extension of, and mostly worked in conjunction with the written text. Their physical proximity in the layout of the book prompted uncomplicated associations between writing and image particularly suited to young or unskilled readers. Such partial foreclosing of the text with straightforward pictorial messages can be encountered in the earliest publications of the Bengal Press (39).

The image and text collaboration that forms the basis of comics had thus made its appearance in the subcontinent. This collaboration although quite a loose one, not interdependent in the way of collaborative meaning formation, and the images still acting as only illustrations of the story and not actively doing much of the storytelling, can still be considered to be a step towards what later developed into comics.

In the late nineteenth century Raja Ravi Varma epitomised the arrival of the modern Indian artist on the Indian scene. His career marks the juncture when traditional court paintings merged with new patterns of professionalism and commercial success in colonial India. It was now that

the individual artist emerged in the public with a full new status. Ravi Varma's singular success at the time lay in his mastery over oil painting and realistic portraiture. Varma's significance lies in his conscious attempt through his themes to forge a new national identity in art by negotiating the traditional content with 'modern' form. What made a recurring appearance in his oil paintings done in the 'modern' realistic style is a range of regional, feminine, and classical and mythological figure types, each purposefully posed as 'Indian.' Varma moved from commissioned portraiture to a series of ethnic figure compositions of Indian women to themes from Hindu mythology and Sanskrit literature, classical *nayikas*, Hindu gods and goddesses, and dramatized mythological episodes. As Varma's career moved from this engagement with forging of the popular taste what became important for him was also its mass production to enable its reach to the wider audience. Towards the end of his career, he is seen producing paintings purely for reproduction by the press, the circulation of his mythic imagery in newer print avatars. By reaching out to the Indian households, because of their easier availability and affordability, these prints by Varma published from his lithographic press at Lonavala in Maharashtra undoubtedly contributed not just spurring but in certain ways even creating the Indian sentiment of culture and religious piety.

It was Abanindranath Tagore and later his protégé Nandalal Bose in Calcutta who sought to revive indigenous art traditions in an attempt to seek a valid alternative to European traditions. Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), an artist at a time when India was under British rule, played a major role in the widespread manifestation of Indian culture and politics around the turn of the nineteenth century by founding an art movement later to be called the Bengal School.

> As a polemical construct, the Bengal School came to represent a break from the prevailing norms of Western academic naturalism, and espoused alternate subjective and spiritual standards of aesthetics and art-creation. In this, the claims of national authenticity were made for its art and it was appropriated by the Indian nationalist struggle for liberation from British rule- (Banerji xvii)

Nandalal Bose was drawn by these paintings of Abanindranath which were printed in the then popular Bengali journals, like *Prabasi*[12] to name one. These journals like *Prabasi* covered a wide area of interests, from political discussions, and economic analyses, to poetry, history and studies of ancient texts. Besides articles many known painters and promising talents found a forum in which their work was presented in reproductions. This inclusion and popularisation of art in the print culture in India is a major step towards

using pictures for conveying a message or rendering a narrative to a larger audience.

Out of Bose's oeuvre of particular interest in the context of my discussion are his linocut prints used in Rabindranath Tagore's *Shahaj Path*. The book is a primer for young minds which becomes significant for its collaboration of Bengali rhymed couplets with images to introduce the vernacular alphabets. Here images do not play a secondary role to the textual to be relegated as only illustrations; rather here both the text and images together engage in meaning formation. They combine to engage the reader's imagination by offering interesting possibilities of meaning. Famous art historian R. Siva Kumar notes about *Sahaj Path* that sometimes 'Rabindranath would compose the verse after seeing Nandal's image, and sometime Rabindranath's verse would inspire Nandalal's linocut' (qtd in Mallik 'Nandalal Bose').

Another one of the very popular hubs of this developing print culture in nineteenth century India was *Battala*. The word *Battala* literally meaning 'under the Banyan tree' derived its name from a giant Banyan tree in Shova Bazaar and Chitpur area of erstwhile Calcutta (now Kolkata). This place is significant here for primarily two reasons, the bulk and the type of its printed material. The presses here at *Battala*, in the second half of the nineteenth century were doing a brisk trade in cheap and popular print. Contrary to the general belief that standardised high literatures succeeded in wiping out lesser print cultures, these prints in fact survived with much vigour, with interesting consequences for the social history of the period.

However, in spite of this long history of sequential pictorial narratives, the comic, cartoons and caricature, Anant Pai, now known as the father of Indian comics, became first acquainted with the comic book medium as popular in the West in the 1930s and finally brought out the first comic in that mould. The story of how it came to be so is also interesting as it seems to have been more of an 'accidental' birth. It goes like this, in addition to the rotary presses, the publisher of the *Times of India*, Bennet, Coleman & Co., has special printing machines that remained idle except during the Diwali holiday calendar printing season. It was with the idea of keeping these machines busy and drawing profit from it that Anant Pai was forwarded by those higher in the management several imported *Superman* comic books to look into the possibility of reprinting some under the banner of the *Times*. The suggestion interested Pai and he took it up instantly to do some research on the same. Instead of just going ahead with the reprinting of *Superman* comics he wanted a new Indian comic book that would not just include reprinted western comics but also some other element that would be keeping in mind its Indian audience. What, however, resulted was the English-

language comic book, the *Indrajal Comics*, making its debut in 1964, with the major portion of its length consisting of the *Phantom* tales and the other portion with short comic tales that would feature Indian characters and scenarios. The first thirty two issues of the series that was born to stay and be popular for a long time contained tales from the *Phantom*. Thereafter tales about *Mandrake the Magician*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Buzz Sawyer* were also included in the series- none of them Indian in content or origin. *Indrajal Comics* was a success but these issues did not quite have the locally produced comics that Pai had thought of. Instead they were devoted to general knowledge, quizzes, and the like, and even that kept getting smaller with the subsequent issues, soon to just contain comics, the western import comics to be precise (McLain).[13]

It took about half a century more to understand what comics can also mean, that they can be more than *Phantom, Mandrake,* and even the quite popular series *Amar Chitra Katha*. That they can be taken more in the sense of picto-narratives, something which India has long had and in plenty, and also that this rich reservoir of Indian art and tradition of storytelling can be linked to what we see as comics today. These later comics are often categorised as graphic novels primarily to be seen as more mature and serious form of literature than what comics at times loosely and reductively are assumed to be. But graphic novels are also comics and for those who see the serious potential of and critical ability of comics they see them as terms quite interchangeable. In the Indian context, however, the journey of the 'official' comics has been of a kind that one might find it quite necessary at times to use a term different for certain printed picto-narratives to distinguish them. Something to indicate the 'maturity' of its content or to avoid its being reductively put aside by readers as just another comic book with cartoons for kids. It is works like *Sita's Ramayana* and *Bhimayana* (generally referred to as graphic novels) that in both its artwork and story content seem more convincingly continuous with India's long tradition of art and storytelling.

Sita's Ramayana by Moyna Chitrakar and Samhita Arni is a graphic novel which uses the indigenous patua painting style for a critical retelling of *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective and links this comic form in India with the long history of the land I have earlier discussed. This story of Sita is in its essence the story told and retold countless times in the oral form by the patuas of West Bengal. This narration as it is passed down to generations orally also undergoes many unconscious and sometimes very conscious additions and alterations. The basic story gets different perspectives from one storyteller to another, who often identifying themselves with it bring in their own experiences, struggles and woes into it. So it has been with Moyna Chitrakar, who learnt the art of storytelling from her mother. As she grew up

in an underprivileged community that was marked by stark gender inequality, she soon could identify the woes of the women of her community with that of the mythical Sita. Since the stories are sung from the patua's memory, they keep altering depending on what and how it is recalled during a particular narration. The turning of these oral narratives into comics one might say spoils their fluidity and uniqueness. However, on the other hand it preserves them before they are lost with waning interest down the generations; also it gives a new dimension to the art form by linking a new medium with an old tradition. It brings an interesting metamorphosis in the art style. This metamorphosis is also very interesting and can become an engaging area of study, a picto-narrative taking one shape from another. A brief note on "Patua Graphics" at the end of the book reveals how the patua is "a living tradition whose roots stretch back in time" but these artists are also "constantly looking for ways to take their work forward" (152). The book's primary aim then is to connect Indian picture storytelling traditions with the sensibilities of the contemporary reader. Here what V. Geetha says is also important as it reveals the significance that art holds in a work like this. It shows that art here functions in a way where it cannot be relegated as just illustration, it is primary narration. Geetha writes that "*Sita's Ramayana* was painted before it was written" as patua artist Moyna Chitrakar, from Bengal in eastern India, enthusiastically "adapted her scroll-version to the form of a fast-paced graphic narrative" (150).

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability is another such comic book that uses indigenous art to create an alternate narrative to the story of Ram with the story of Bhim or Bhimrao Ambedkar; and while it does so it raises quite key issues about the problems of the Dalit. Here this book impressively weaves the story of the iconic man with Gond art and gives it a shape that is able to reach a larger audience because of the wider access, appeal and popularity of the format. Gond tribal art called *Digna* and *Bhittichitra*, where 'bhitti' means wall and 'chitra' is painting, originated as patterns and paintings made on wall and floors by people of the tribe in Madhya Pradesh. It was much later, in the 1980s in fact that the first Gond painting on paper happened; Jangarh Singh Shyam was the first to do so. For the Gonds oral narrative is to a large extent imbedded in their culture and rituals. This tradition of long existing storytelling of the tribe was later complimented with painting. It is much in this traditional way that the comic/graphic novel *Bhimayana* has been narrated.

The whole process of conceiving and rendering *Bhimayana* is different from that of *Sita's Ramayana* though. Unlike the later where the patua artists were taught to make their art 'fit' into the panel pattern of comics, *Bhimayana* breaks much of these repetitive and confining panels. In the afterword to the

book S. Anand notes how the Gond artists Durgabai and Subhash Vyam objected to the "stifling grammar" of the graphic novels as shown to them in works of the masters of the western counterpart- Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi being some of them. "We'd like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. . . .We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is khulla (open) where there's space for all to breathe," Anand recalls the Vyams saying (Anand 100). So the idea was not to change the Gond style of art in accordance with the western style of comics, rather to do "something that would defy the conventional grammar of graphic books" (Anand 100).

However, having said that, it is also true that every form has an underlying grammar. In *Bhimayana* the grammar used takes into cognition the artistic possibilities of Gond art. For example when, because of issues regarding the affordability of a book with too many full page drawings, a method was required to divide the pages instead of using the conventional gutters, the solution was the traditional Gond pattern of 'digna.' Another instance could be the stereotypical speech bubbles containing the English dialogue exchanges, which the book has not been able to completely do away with. The very concept of a speech bubble in comic books is western; the oral narrations in the Indian vernaculars are by contrast more fluid to be cramped into bubbles. However, they have been re-shaped in accordance with the need of the work in question. An artistic reshaping of them has been attempted to vest them with an added symbolic significance of the indigenous art. There are the bird speech bubbles, thought bubbles, scorpion speech bubbles which show an earnest attempt of not just using Indian indigenous art but indigenising the form as well.

The comics of the recent decades, which are called the graphic novels, have transformed to a large extent from the first comic that officially arrived in India from the Western waters. In these years of comics rapidly developing as a form it is being increasingly seen in a light that is, as I have attempted to argue, not new in the country. Rather it is the use of the form of comics as picto-narrative that has long been there in its many forms and possibilities at home, close by, waiting to be rediscovered and represented with new potential and reach. These comics take forward a long tradition, of art, storytelling, critique, wit and humour of the land to show that the it becomes quite a curious case when comics had to be 'born' in India in the way they did.

Endnotes

[1] *The Phantom* series first began in 1936 with Lee Falk, an American, as its creator. This series, after it initially came out in newspaper strips was

later published in issue wise arranged books by the King Features Syndicate and only much later, three decades later in fact, began to be published in India.

[2] Buddhist art reflects all important aspects of Buddhism. It refers to the rich and diverse representations of religious images, sculpture, dance, and symbols deriving from the various Buddhist communities found around the world. Early Buddhist art emerged in India and Sri Lanka following the death of Gautama Buddha (563 BCE to 483 BCE). *Buddhist Art in India and Sri Lanka* (2000) by Virender Kumar Dabral can be consulted for further reference.

[3] *2500 Years of Buddhism* by P.V. Bapat and *The Ajanta Caves: Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India* by Milo Cleveland Beach are some books that can be referred to for detailed study

[4] The word 'Chitrakathi' is made up of two words 'chitra' meaning image or painting and 'kathi' meaning teller of tales, so the word might roughly translate as the one who tells tales through pictures

[5] The Phad painting is a popular style of folk painting. It is generally done on a long piece of cloth. It is practiced in northern India, especially in rural areas. Thematically these paintings are the depiction of deities and mythological stories, including legends adoring the brave kings and Rajput idols who were famous in Rajasthan.

[6] Here with 'Pata' meaning cloth and 'chitra' meaning painting, the world literally translates as painting on a piece of cloth. But in spite of its name *pata-chitra* was not conceived as a painting without the oral narrative

[7] Since the narration was oral in most cases they were fluid and changing as the storyteller wished to take liberties with it. Each storytelling session by even the same *chitrakar* therefore was different from another, thus also making it unique.

[8] They originated in the 19th century Bengal, in the vicinity of Kalighat Kali temple, Kalighat, Kolkata. An important achievement of the Kalighat artists was that they made simple paintings and drawings, which could easily be reproduced by lithography. Such prints were then hand coloured. The charm of this style of painting lies in the fact that they captured the essence of daily life.

[9] This was at the Portuguese colony of Goa and for the purpose of wider dissemination of evangelical teachings among the local people by the Jesuit brotherhood, a mission pioneered by St. Francis Xavier. The press was established at the St Paul's College in old Goa and between 1556

and 1588 printed thirteen publications owing to the expertise of Joao De Bustamante, a Spaniard who set up the press and operated it with Indian assistants.

[10] For further reading see "Thomas Daniell and the Picturesque Possession of India" from *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India*

[11]*Annadamangal* is a collection of songs and verses dedicated to the Goddess Annapurna (Goddess of bounty of rice). The Bengali poet Bharatchandra Ray 'Gunakar' (1712-1760) composed these verses in 18th century (1752). Bharatchandra was well versed in Bengali and Sanskrit as well as Persian and Indian classical music. His talent was noted by the royal court and soon he was appointed as the court poet of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia who conferred on him the title of Gunakar ('Mine of virtues'). He was the first 'people's poet' in Bengali language and a true representative of the transition period between medieval and modern Bengali literature. *Annadamangal* is his most well-known work.

[12]*Prabasi* a Bangla journal regularly published for more than sixty years, was started by Ramananda Chattopadhyay (1865-1943) in Baisakh, BS (April 1901), in Allahabad. He continued this journal from Calcutta when he settled in the city in 1908. Well edited and well produced, it contained multi-coloured prints of paintings from second year. It regularly published articles on art and artists and by religiously publishing the works of the Bengal School of artists, Ramananda helped much in popularising Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and others. Ramananda himself was interested in art studies and wrote on the Ajanta Cave paintings in the first issue.

[13] A detailed research by Karline McLain in *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* is the source for most details regarding the birth of *Indrajal Comics* here and her interesting study can be consulted for further reference.

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