

SAYYID JAMAL AL-DIN AFGHANI'S PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF NEWSMEDIA IN THE REHABILITATION OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838-1897) was, perhaps, the first Muslim thinker in modern times to advocate an all-inclusive strategy for rejuvenation of the Muslim world. His approach, in the terminology of the renowned British historian Toynbee, was both Herodian and zealot and he spared no effort to call for the removal of the weaknesses which had consumed the body politic of the 'Ummah'. It was his life-long passion to see the Muslims recapturing their pristine glory by reshaping their lives in the light of the Islamic precepts and modern science and to defend their freedom threatened by indigenous autocratic rule and aggressive foreign powers.

To approach his idea of religious rectitude and social reforms, Jamal al-Din addressed countless gatherings of students and notables in all the Muslim countries visited by him during his mercurial life. In his efforts to disseminate a reformatory zeal, he was best assisted by the emerging press of the Muslim countries. It was, indeed, ironic that press in the Muslim world had its beginning under the Western alien influence and control. This was of little advantage to the native population for obvious reasons: the local press aimed at providing information to the ruling community, represented and propagated the imperial interests of Europe with a disregard to the national welfare, and above all, it was mostly in a foreign language - a Greek letter to the native population. In independent Muslim countries like Turkey, Iran, Morocco and Afghanistan conditions were no better, as the two papers issued from Istanbul and Cairo entitled "Takvimi Vekayi" and "Vekayi Misriye" respectively were no more than official news bulletins and, therefore, of no real help in the dissemination of any thought provoking ideas. This situation, however, began to take a turn for the better by the mid nineteenth century with the passage of journalism to the hands of native

and liberal elements.

The emergence of native and vernacular press in Muslim lands was effected under the influence of the Western traditions of journalism, but Jamal al-Din had also his share in inspiring the natives to establish and develop the vernacular press. It was he who himself set a good example by starting newspapers, which greatly encouraged the native journalists in lands under European control to exercise freedom of expression, despite many laws to frighten and silence them. This happy change was the beginning of the movement of ideas, which had been associated with the name of Jamal al-Din.

The significant contribution of Jamal al-Din in the development of the vernacular press could be well-established if we consider that in the early period of his life, while he was in Afghanistan, he impressed upon the ruling Amirs the need to establish newspapers in the country. As the chief advisor to Amir Azam Khan (1867-68), Jamal al-Din was believed to have drawn-up a plan for national recovery and cultural resurrection, which included the publication of a newspaper instituted by him under the name "Kabul". The newspaper was short-lived and none of its copies has been available anywhere which could determine Jamal al-Din's role in its publication. However, it was under his inspiration that the succeeding Amir Sher Ali introduced another periodical "Shams Al-Nahar" which appeared in 1875 but ceased its publication, like its precursor after a brief period in 1879. The pioneering efforts of Jamal al-Din in Afghanistan were aimed at acquainting the people with the reforms and day-to-day activities of the government. Although both the publications were short-lived because of the rapidly changing political conditions in Afghanistan, but, it revealed unmistakably Jamal al-Din's earnestness to see his ideas take root in the hearts of the Muslim educated classes. His second attempt was more effective, although, like the earlier ones it was also short-lived. The publication of al-Urwat al-Wuthqa was a much more serious effort as it was claimed that if its publication had continued for a longer duration, there was the fear of an uprising in Muslim lands in general and in Arab re-

gions in particular as it was said to be most enthusiastically read by the Muslims everywhere next only to the recitation of Holy Quran. ² This brought a sense of danger to the very door of the imperialist powers and led to its ban in Egypt and India, and ultimately to an unhappy end to its publication after a bare nine months. In 1892 Jamal al-Din was believed to have started another multilingual journal called "Dia-ul-Khafikain" (The light of the two Hemispheres) in English, Arabic, Urdu and most probably in other languages of the Muslim people. His third attempt was still more unsuccessful than his earlier efforts, for Dia al-Khafikain was more short-lived than al-Urwat al-Wuthqa.

The efforts of Jamal al-Din to propagate his ideas through press, met with limited success due to many external as well as internal pressures. The autocratic Muslim princes and the Western imperial powers were quick to see the danger to their authority inherent in the preaching of his revolutionary and reformatory ideas. Both the inimical forces joined hands and their combined efforts were successful in depriving him one of the most important means through which he could have managed to influence the people at large under their rule.

His journalistic activities were not confined to the establishment of the magazines and newspapers recounted in the preceding paragraph, but he also actively helped those who were interested in journalism and wanted to establish printing presses or newspapers. To one of his young Syrian disciples, Edib Ishaq, Jamal al-Din helped both materially and morally to start two newspapers named "al-Misir" and "al-Tijarah" in Cairo and Alexandria respectively. This help was not confined to direct monetary or moral support, for Jamal al-Din besides contributing articles under a pseudonym Madhar Ibn Waddah under titles such as "The Eastern Governments and their kinds" and "On British and Afghanistan" encouraged and advised his students such as Muhammad Abduh and Ibrahim al-Laqani to write articles for publication in these two newspapers. ³ Jamal al-Din also helped James Sanua, one of his Egyptian Jewish friends in the publication of a journal called "Abu Nadarah" and was a great source of

strength for him in his journalistic activities while both of them were in Paris. In 1878 when Jamal al-Din was in Egypt he aided Salim al-An'nahouri in the establishment of a printing press known as "al-Ittehad" and in the publication of a newspaper called "Mirat al-Sharq". This was only a glimpse of the manifold influences which emanated from Jamal al-Din and which were moving the Muslim and Eastern intellect towards this important field of activity in the late 19th century. 4

The great importance which Jamal al-Din attached to the Press and more particularly to journalism, becomes more understandable if we look at it from a different angle. It is well known that Jamal al-Din wrote only one small book besides a "Short History of Afghanistan", on "Refutation of Materialism" and a three pages article on "Babis" in Dairat al-Maarif; but widely contributed articles to the local press of all the capitals in East and West, where he had the chance to set his foot. Writing of articles and press interviews did not require any sustained intellectual effort which was more in harmony with his temperament. Moreover, he was sick of the slumber which was wrapping the contemporary East and desired quick results through revolutionary means. For this purpose, journalism was ideally suited to convey his forceful speeches to the public, and did not require that exertion which necessarily follows by confining oneself to a writing table. The collection of his Persian articles published by Sifatullah Jamali was also originally contributed to the Indian vernacular Press, like his other articles in Arabic and French which also appeared in the Press. There is little doubt that Jamal al-Din could hardly have been able to preach and propagate his ideas if there had been no intermediary like the existence of vernacular and local press. The disciples of Jamal al-Din, just like that of Socrates, could have preserved only his name but the people would for sure have lost that direct touch with him which the Press had been able to perpetuate. 5

In one of his Persian articles contributed to the journal "Muallim-i-Shafiq" while he was in Hyderabad (India), Jamal al-Din emphasised the need and importance of journalism under the caption "The Advantages of Journals" in

which he referred to various benefits which the newsmedia can confer on the people.⁶ "For anyone who wants goodness and happiness", says Jamal al-Din, newspapers are (like) a world-revealing telescope, a kind physician and an expert doctor ensuring a complete relief from all kinds of sickness. It is a true and sincere counsellor, which reprimands the ignorant and a guiding light for the wise ones; a considerate teacher, which teaches wisdom and good behaviour to the people; a hope inspiring to those who are desperate in their thoughts. It is a friend in loneliness and a (consoling) companion in desolation and indeed a fortress of civilization and a granite rock of human happiness".⁷ Counting its usefulness, Jamal al-Din particularly emphasised the practical service which journalism can perform for the welfare of mankind. "The newspapers are," says Jamal al-Din, "an aid to the agriculturists in the arts of cultivation, a teacher to the industrialists, and a guide to the traders. It is an advisor to the ruling class, guiding them in the dispensation of justice and a (book of) useful practices for the politicians".⁸ In his assessment of the value of the journalism, Jamal al-Din was greatly aware of the social reformation which could be effected through the newsmedia and was equally conscious of its educational value as well as contribution to political developments in a country.

Speaking of the social benefits which are bestowed on society by the newsmedia, Jamal al-Din declared emphatically that journalism is a unique profession which aims at giving not only an expression to the conditions of society but it also tries to remove the ills by pointing out the remedies. This reformative aspect is an inseparable part of the influence enjoyed by the newspapers and is not confined to one particular nation but is expansive to the whole group of nations. The benefits of journalism with their universal application are numerous, some of which, as viewed by Jamal al-Din, may be interesting to recount.

It works psychologically on the minds of its readers in order to rectify the social condition of the people. This working is through indirect methods such as the publication of articles and life sketches of those who are gifted with mastery over many arts and sciences or who have attained eminent

position in the public life. This attitude of praise is justifiable on the ground that due homage is paid to those deserving figures of the old times, as well as befitting analogy for the living ones who are doing great things. It also has a healthy social affect on the society by creating a spirit of competition among the people to attain eminent position in the community. The infusion of the spirit to achieve something extra-ordinary in life encourages people to make efforts for the realisation of thier dreams which results in thier progress and an increase in the welfare of community. The news-media plays a multi-dimensional role in the socio-political uplift of a community which may be enumerated, as follows, in the light of Jamal al-Din's observations.

1. The journalists are in an ideal position to criticise all facets of social evils and explain to the people the harmful results of baneful practices. By condemnation of the evils prevailing in a society, Jamal al-Din looked to journalism as an ideal agency which helps the people to safeguard themselves by informing them of its consequences as well as aid in the strengthening of goodness which he believed to be inherent in the mankind.¹⁰

2. It informs the people of the pitfalls of wickedness and strife, so that the people could take care not to fall in them, and propagates the ways and means to attain happiness. It also helps the people to be attracted towards the benefits which the world has to offer to them and which are within the human reach. The media-person is under a heavy obligation to write fearlessly on everything that ensures some advantage to the people no matter where he sees it or who has initiated it.¹¹

3. The prevention of evils and propagation of moral ideals in a community is ethically valuable for its preservation but it has only a theoretical value in it. Jamal al-Din viewed the social obligations of press from a wider angle in which he particularly stressed the practical aspects of the social reformation which is being affected or should be carried out by the journalists. The concrete move of journalism he thought to be that of giving guidance and a lead to his people for the achievement of material progress.

4. After speaking of excellence, greatness of mankind, the periodicals invite rich and influential people to achieve a high position in this life and hereafter by establishing institutes of science and arts for the dissemination of knowledge and encourages them to establish industries and hospitals for the welfare of the community.¹²

5. It is a guide to the chronic sick people to reach the doctor and specialist for the recovery of their health, helps the ignorant to find out the wisemen and leads the poor to the way of wealth and prosperity.¹³

6. In order to ensure the proper functioning of the society, journalism is an ideal aid to goad the judiciary to dispense justice and convinces them of its advantages to the society. Journalism is a spokesman as well as a pleader of the people, by carrying the public complaints to the government and, thereby, reduces the evils of bureaucracy. It helps to end bribery and nepotism, investigates the internal cause of events in order to discover the truth and achieving it informs the authorities concerned for appropriate action. By its deep insight into the affairs of a society or nation journalism helps in safeguarding the public interest and by warning the government of its unjust and capricious officials, it saves the good reputation of the government.¹⁴

7. The co-operation between the people and government is necessary for the general welfare but, according to Jamal al-Din, public welfare is nothing but a result of the occurrence of industrial and other professional profits. The profits occur as a result of the advancement of learning which is an indivisible part of a progressive civilization. It proves by human reason with reference to the world events that no concept of welfare, however, faulty or flawless it may appear, is capable of realisation without industrial development.¹⁵

8. Press tries to convince the people that their ignorance of the useful arts and professional sciences is responsible for all their troubles and misfortunes.¹⁶ The lessons of practical morality and noble human virtues carried to the people through the medium of periodical press in simple language and lucid style is of immense educational value.

9. The newsmedia performs one of its important obliga-

tions by disseminating all necessary learning in such a language that it can be understood by an ordinary human mind. This enables the general reader to have knowledge of the nature of important subjects, such as geography, astronomy, physical sciences, agriculture, industry, medical sciences, child psychology and his up-bringing, political administration and other allied subjects, which could be useful for the people and are of public interest.¹⁷

10. It divides all the learning in accordance with its nature and importance and after classifying learning into various parts gives them grading according to their public utility. The journals illustrate the necessity of learning and its usefulness in the development of human society. This is of particular importance to those who are immature and wanting in wisdom so that they should not waste their lives in useless pursuits and work hard for the attainment of beneficial learning.¹⁸

11. The newsmedia presents the need of education in a way that the people are inspired with a genuine desire to learn various arts and sciences. It convinces the people that not only the individual but the whole nation is dependent on the advancement of learning for national prosperity.¹⁹

12. The services of a journalist are not confined to the propagation of useful ideas to the general readers alone but he is also an instrument in the transmission of ideas from one wise man to another and, thereby, helps the scholars and doctors of learning to exchange and advance their intellectual horizons keeping pace with the developing world. This invisible import and export of ideas is not limited to the borders of a certain country, but is carried out at a larger scale through the agency of newspapers and magazines.²⁰

It was not only in the context of educational development and social uplift that Jamal-al-Din praised the activities of the journalists nor did he confine himself in appreciating the services of journalists in science subjects alone, he believed that the newsmedia should also cater for the livelier side of a community's life.

13. The Journalists must publish light items which may refresh the minds of the people. This may be achieved by

publishing stories, fables, pithy remarks which could make the people laugh and occasionally bring in print poems which are likely to create a living interest in the fine arts.²¹

14. In the field of public entertainment the newsmedia renders an invaluable service by giving information on travel and tourism. This, not only gives a sensational pleasure to the readers, who while sitting in their home could visualise the difference between their conditions and those of other countries. This could foster an upsurge of adventuring spirit within the readers and provide an insight into the socio-political life of more developed countries which could be source of inspiration for improving their own condition. These finer aspects of life should be reflected in the newsmedia for recreational purposes so as not to burden the peoples mind. This approach was evidently in harmony with his idea of work, refresh and again to more work.²²

Recommending the advantages of the periodical vernacular press for the advancement of a country, Jamal-al-Din took great pains to stress its contribution to the social and educational development of the people but was cautious in his reference to its advantages in political awakening of the people.²³ This was not surprising if we consider the delicate situation in which he wrote the article on the advantages of journalism while he was staying in India after his expulsion from Egypt (1879). The hostility of the British Indian Government towards him was well-known and he could hardly get anything published on political affairs. Despite this disadvantage and the fact that he devoted himself entirely to intellectual pursuits during 1879-82, he did not refrain from indirect reference to the improvement in the political situation which could be effected through the newsmedia. His oblique references to the subject were few but pertinent.

15. The journalists by their emphasis on the history of the people who have lost their identity as a separate nation in the whirlpool of historical flux, enable the politicians of their day to conform to the conditions necessary for the survival of their nations. This equally helps the people by giving them a lesson by tracing the past history so that they could raise their spirits high and call to their aid the national dignity and self

pride in order to remove the causes which had led to political disintegration at an earlier age. He considered this possible through "Ijtihad" - the renovation of the inner self of the man which alone could enable him to change and conform to his political conditions according to the needs of the contemporary world. If the people are not a living and dynamic body, Jamal al-Din had little doubt that the newsmedia could still be of service, perhaps of greater service as it could remind its readers of the catastrophic results of the wrong policies pursued by their fore-fathers in the past, and, thereby, could be an instrument in warning the people of the dangers lying ahead of them.²⁴

16. By encouraging his compatriots to march towards progress and to infuse a new spirit and activity among the younger generations, journalism is an ideal source. It reminds and transmits the glorious deeds of their great ancestors. The glorification of the national heroes and a description of their wonderful deeds is an invaluable treasure for the people of that nation, through which they draw inspiration and an urge for the recapture of the bye-gone greatness.²⁵

17. By imbuing the younger generation with the spirit of reviving the traditions of their great ancestors, journalism tries to find a common ground for the people to undertake joint action in accordance with the needs of the times. This common forum could be widely publicised through periodicals by pointing out the common ancestry, ethnicity, language, history and traditions, which could unite various groups of people into one compound whole and thus give a new life to the nation.²⁶

Not only the national unity and patriotic fervour could be achieved through the progress of journalism, Jamal al-Din also considered it a valuable agency in the defence of a community against foreign intrusions and incursions. This part of the obligations of newsmedia was mostly confined by Jamal al-Din to verbal suggestion of remedies while he was in India but soon after his arrival in Paris, he started the publication *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa* (1884) through which he recommended adoption of all kinds of violent means to overthrow

the European rule in the Muslim lands. Again in the pages of *Dia-ul-Khafikain* which was published from London in 1892, Jamal al-Din preached the overthrow of the autocratic Shah of Persia - a Muslim ruler, who in his opinion had forfeited his right to rule for non-observance of Islamic law and indulgence to the foreigners economic and political influence.²⁷ In the exposition of his defensive strategy against the Western political and ideological influx, Jamal al-Din wanted the press to generate political consciousness among the Muslim masses and also to suggest remedial action to safeguard the progressive indigenous values of life.

18. The preservation and progress of a nation is largely dependent on the journalists performing their duty of defending the nation by pen against any unjustifiable attack levelled by any foreigner. This defence could best be carried out by the newspapers through logical presentation of arguments and evidence against the contentions of the foreigners, as logic combined with evidence are more sharp than the blade of a sword and pierces deeper into the cells of a brain.²⁸

19. Another obligation of the newsmedia is to make the people of his nation capable of distinguishing between their friends and foes. This is important because an unknown enemy is very dangerous for the security of a country and for the safety of a nation. A neglect of this important function could enable an enemy manoeuvre easily in his deceitful practices. A journalist is duty bound to expose such an enemy for the safety of the nation.²⁹

As regards the preaching and propagation of violent methods through newsmedia for the rectification of Muslim attitude towards their political condition, Jamal al-Din had his restraints while he was in British India. But once in Paris and London, he frankly expressed his disgust, amounting to hatred, for the British rule in the Muslim lands and was equally critical of the autocratic rule of the Muslim princes in the East. He was appreciative of those newspapers which translated and published his articles in the vernacular press.³⁰ His propagation of the needs and benefits of a political revolution stemmed from his sincere conviction that could be the only affective method for the advancement of

the Muslim in all walks of life and an effective instrument in warding off the native absolutism and foreign domination. Besides this, he was keen to see a mutual understanding established between various nationalist movements of political emancipation in the East and harmonise and unite such efforts through the medium of vernacular press. Jamal al-Din repeatedly requested the editors of the native press in the Muslim countries to translate his articles for publication in the local languages, so that a sympathy and understanding could be created among various Muslim people of different nationalities.³¹ This, he thought, would not only strengthen such a national movement internally but also externally by giving information and appreciation about such movements of national liberation in other countries against foreign yoke. The newspapers, therefore, can do the unique service of raising the morale of the people struggling under many strains and difficulties from within and outside. In this respect Jamal al-Din was not totally disappointed as the Muslim newsmedia by transmitting his ideas was slowly converting intellectuals and reformers in Iran, Egypt and particularly in India, who played a prominent part in religious, social and political transformation of their countries by following the path traced out by Jamal al-Din.³²

Reviewing the conditions of journalism in Egypt and India, Jamal al-Din could not help expressing his surprise at the prevalent low standard which he thought was the result of mediemen advancing their base selfish interests as well as the lack of public interest. He refused to concede to the argument put forward by some people that the daily local press was not popular in India because its contents were not very rich, useful or interest-creating for the general reader. "This reason cannot find popular acceptance", Jamal al-Din pointed out, "for it is well known to every wise man that the basis of industry, the laws of linguistics, acquiring of skill and excellence in the performance; all amenities and develops through the popular public needs. (In such a condition) the fault lies not in newspapers but in the general public thinking".³³ He had little doubt that if the people show a genuine interest in the vernacular daily press, there could be no reason, what-

soever, to think that it will not keep pace with the needs and demands of the times. It could be a great source of advancement for human civilization if some of the millions of the people of the Sub-continent start encouraging the vernacular press, which would provide a sufficient impetus to the journalists to offer not only that which is best in the native mind but will also be able to add to it the best advanced by the thinkers of other countries.³⁴ By emphasising the role of public opinion in the development of periodical press, Jamal al-Din was trying to bring to the mind of his readers the need and importance of standard periodical press capable of emerging only if the intelligentsia could give it proper support. Journalism could be popular if the people have the willingness and patience to read what it writes, which is dependent, to a large extent, on the positive public reaction to capture the dynamics of the modern attitude towards reform and progress that it has to offer.

Speaking of the duties and obligations of the vernacular press, Jamal al-Din also touched upon the delicate problem of using pen with moderation, after observing the facts with coolness and objectivity, criticise constructively and see that the balance between the different forces is maintained for the healthy development of the community. Keen to see moderation practiced, Jamal al-Din could not help criticising the development and progress of daily press in Egypt which had similar troubles to face, that is, the attitude of the journalists who had been trying to exploit the public with sensational news in order to increase the sale of their papers. In the wake of a general political upsurge in Egypt in which Jamal al-Din had played a leading role during the years of his stay there, the editors of the newspapers were taking undue advantage to attack the British administration sometimes for unjustifiable reasons because of public hostility towards the British. This may be helpful to the individuals publishing such news or articles but it could hardly bring beneficial results to the people in general and authorities in particular who expect some concrete suggestions from them for the improvement of conditions in the country. ³⁵ This, he believed, was because of the fact that the journalists, have forgotten the duty

which had befallen on their shoulders after the British occupation of Egypt. They had neglected the work of education, training of morals and failed to create a sense of unity and brotherhood among the people, without which no co-operation or progress was possible. There could be little doubt that under these circumstances, observed Jamal al-Din, if the British had left the country, as demanded by them vociferously, old anarchy in its worst form was sure to reappear in Egypt.

In fact this was not the only trouble which journalism was facing in the Muslim lands. Its backward state only reflected the miserable state of the Muslim society as a whole. The number and standard of the periodical press was reflective of the degree of civilization attained by the Muslims which obversely depicted the unfortunate state of the Muslim society. In such a state of affairs, the periodical press failed to achieve any positive results which led to the perpetuation of these conditions. ³⁷ This had happened because the journalists lack the essential qualification which, according to Jamal al-Din, was integrity in all spheres of their professional dealings. The important place which a journalist occupy in the society makes it imperative for him to be just and truthful and absolutely indifferent to the monetary gains. For love of money is sure to hinder him in the performance of his duties; influence him in twisting the truth and turn it into a lie; show the dishonest to be honest, faithful to be unfaithful, trustworthy to be untrustworthy, strong to be week, beneficial to be harmful; turn beauty into ugliness, and made the people look indefinite realities to be definite and present, and the distant objects to be near at hand and vice versa. This was the attitude which brought sharp condemnation from Jamal al-Din for those who sacrificed national interest for earning money and goodwill of the foreign rulers. ³⁸

Jamal al-Din was equally critical of the European press for he could not conceal his surprise at their mishandling of information material about Eastern countries. Rightly or wrongly he thought it to be in an ideal position to tell the truth about the conditions in the East, because of its traditions of freedom and defence of humanity in distress. He was an-

noyed of the unsympathetic criticism of the British newsmedia when he was planning to start his Arabic paper 'al-Urwat al-Wuthqa', simply because it avowedly aimed at defending the rights of the Eastern people. He could not help mocking at the real or affected ignorance of the British press on the true conditions in Persia or other Muslim lands. 39 In his enthusiasm to laud the activities of the journalists in advancing human civilization, Jamal al-Din had evidently forgotten that the civilization as understood in the West was Western civilization, the concept of justice applicable only to the white civilized men, and humanity in distress again meant to be related to the white men living in pain and poverty in goals or slums of Europe. Somehow his own observations about the conditions of periodical vernacular press had slipped from the mind of Jamal al-Din as he had neglected to note that the European press was only reflecting the state of European society - a society composed of empire building nations.

There is little doubt that it was the impact of these conditions which made Jamal al-Din complain about the ineffectiveness of newspapers in the revival of the Muslims lost greatness. 40 It was but natural in view of the social constraints and political disabilities with which the journalists were confronted in the honest performance of their work. He did not hesitate to caution that the newspapers in their infancy, as they were in the Muslim lands, could equally harm the national interests in case they fall into irresponsible or unfriendly hands. "Even if it be granted that whatsoever the journalists write, it is for the benefit and good of the people", observed Jamal al-Din, "how many people (are literate and) read the newspapers and how many of them understand the contents? Is it not imperative (to draw any useful results), to make the people aware of the utility of the newspapers"? 41 These inhibitions and constraints notwithstanding, he remained convinced that the newsmedia could serve as the most potent instrument in effecting the rehabilitation of the Muslim world.

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