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THE DISCOURSE OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

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Abstract

In Hinduism and Buddhism, religious leadership is commonly associated with men. However, historical evidence shows that women had become religious leaders, though their appearance was marginal and not publicly visible. With the rise of modernity, the existence of female religious leadership has begun to be publicly recognized and visible. Though there have been patriarchal elements and practices in Hinduism and Buddhism, the two religions have provided spaces and opportunities for women's religious leadership. This article, thus, seeks to comparatively examine the discourse of women's religious leadership in Hinduism and Buddhism. In what ways and contexts can Hindu and Buddhist women be religious leaders? What constitutes women's religious leadership in the two religions? This article argues that both Hindu and Buddhist traditions are ambivalent about female religious leadership. While the religious leadership of Hinduism is charismatic, non-institutionalized, and highly dependent on public recognition, that of Buddhism, by contrast, is institutionalized and significantly determined by the established rules of Buddhist monastic institutions (Sangha). The divergent models of religious leadership suggest different ways in which female religious leaders are recognized.

Keyword : women's religious leadership, discourse, Hinduism, Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

Religion has been perceived to be the source of gendered injustice. Western feminism maintains that religion must be discarded since it has contributed to patriarchy.[1] This may be accurate in that men frequently control the development of religion and religious interpretations. As a result, what has been stated about women in religious tradition arguably does not reflect women's voices but rather the projection and view of males on women, which, in turn, results in a social construction that puts men's superiority over women.

Western feminists have criticized Hinduism and Buddhism for upholding and maintaining patriarchy. The Hindu idea of dharma has greatly influenced the status and roles of women within

[1] Ziba Mir Hosseini, "The Quest for Gender Justice Emerging Feminist Voice in Islam," *Islam 21*, no. 36 (2004): 2.

a family and community throughout history. Women's *dharma* was believed to be chaste, devoted, and subservient to their husbands deemed as gods. Therefore, women's roles were commonly associated with the domestic sphere and thus excluded from the public sphere.[2] Meanwhile, the existence of Buddhist nuns began to decline soon after the time of the Buddha. They were treated as inferiors and barred from the monastery (*Sangha*) that was largely controlled by monks. Women's ordination was rejected, and "the eight chief rules" that benefit the monks were established for the nuns.[3]

Western feminism's accusation of religion is misleading since it consists of vast and diverse interpretations and traditions embedded in history, culture, and socio-political life.[4] In other words, there is no single expression within a particular religion. In this regard, scholarly studies reveal that both Hindus and Buddhist women had historically been religious leaders, although they were not socially visible. From the medieval Hindu texts, early female gurus were said to have religious leadership and gain public recognition, though there was a tension in which women's religious leadership was considered to be contrary to women's *dharma*.[5] Meanwhile, in Buddhism, there is historical evidence showing that in early Buddhism, nuns had equal status and position as those of monks. Nuns had access to pursue their enlightenment (*nirvana*), to participate in the monastic life, and to interpret *Tripitaká*.[6]

Besides, since the twentieth century, both Hindus and Buddhists have attempted to reform their religious traditions to maintain gender equality and women empowerment, along with responding to the challenge of modernity and globalization. Hindu and Buddhist women have actively led and engaged in religious activities, and male-oriented teachings have been reinterpreted. Brahmanic and monks' patriarchy has also been subjected to interrogation and evaluation.

Though there have been patriarchal elements and practices in Hinduism and Buddhism, the two religions have provided spaces and opportunities for women's religious leadership. However, in what ways and contexts can Hindu and Buddhist women be religious leaders? What constitutes women's religious leadership in the two religions? This article seeks to comparatively examine the discourse of women's religious leadership in Hinduism and Buddhism based on existing scholarly studies. It is significant to compare the discourse between the two religions, as

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[2] Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young, *Women and Religious Traditions*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

[3] Eva K. Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions* (Oxford, 2004), 88, Oxford University Press.

[4] Diane L. Moore, "Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States," *Educational Leadership*, 2010, 12.

[5] Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States*, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States*, 2011, 26, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195145380.001.0001.

[6] Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions*, 87.

both Hinduism and Buddhism emerged in the same place, namely the Indian sub-continent. Besides, as Peter Harvey states, to understand the place of women in Buddhism, one should also take into account the position of women within the culture in which it emerged, namely Indian Hindus culture.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

On Religious Leadership

What is religious leadership? It is imperative to define the term, for it serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the issue. Religious leadership is defined as a religious specialist who becomes an authoritative reference for his/her religious groups or communities. Weber's theory of charisma is among the key concept of religious leadership. Developing Weber's theory, Douglas F. Barnes defined charisma as follows:

> "Charisma is authority relationship which arises when a leader through the dynamics of a set of teachings, a unique personality, or both elicits response of awe, deference, and devotion from a group of people."[7]

Charismatic religious leadership, thus, constitutes not only uniquely personal qualities different from laypeople but also public recognition. Such a theory of charismatic leadership might be appropriate to non-institutional or non-organizational religious leaders whose authority highly depends on public recognition. However, it is noteworthy that there is also another type of religious leadership which is institutionalized. In this type of leadership, religious authority is highly dependent on the recognition of a particular religious institution. Both types of religious leadership are used here to identify religious leadership in Hinduism and Buddhism. As I shall explain, while Hinduism is inclined to the former, Buddhism is inclined to the latter.

In Hinduism, *guru* is a distinguished category that refers to religious leadership. Specifically, it refers to a religious specialist who had mastered the tradition and attained enlightenment. Accordingly, a *guru* is deemed as the most important religious figure in Indian culture since Hindus' ultimate goal is to attain *moksha* and escape from the cycle of *samsara*. In other words, for Hindus, we need the enlightened spiritual master to assist us in achieving the same enlightenment. Thus, the role of *the guru* is said to be spiritual and intellectual guidance for disciples. This can be done through "teaching, meditation, interpreting scriptural texts, energy transmission, worship, and personal guidance."[8]

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[7] Douglas F. Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1978, 2, https://doi.org/10.2307/1385423.

[8] Ellen Goldberg and Marie-Thérèse Charpentier, "Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2012, 15.

It must be distinguished between *guru* and *shadu* (male)/*shadvi* (female). The latter refers to a Hindu practicing renunciation, a withdrawal from mundane life such as power, wealth, and marriage. Although both have similarities in practicing ascetic ways of life, *shadu*/*shadvi* is not a category of religious leadership in Hinduism, for it does not fit what constitutes *a guru*. It is also interesting that the term *guru* is used for both males and females.[9]

The religious leadership of *a guru* is charismatic and non-institutionalized, highly dependent on social recognition. According to Hindu tradition, the very prerequisites for evaluating the credibility and authority of a *guru* are having spiritual knowledge and experiencing personal enlightenment. Therefore, only those who can fulfil the prerequisites are worthy to lead disciples to attain enlightenment. In sum, to be a religious leader, a *guru* requires not only excellently personal, intellectual, and spiritual qualities but also the manifestation of these qualities to gain public recognition and trust.[10]

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism's religious leadership is more complicated. To understand this, we must consider the monastic institution (*Sangha*). The followers of Buddha are classified into two categories: the monastics and the laity. While the former consists of monks (*bhikkhu*) for males and nuns (*bhikkhuni*) for females, the latter is laypeople practicing Buddhism, called *upāsakas* for males and *upāsikās* for females. Both the monastics and the laity can attain enlightenment (*nirvana*). However, generally, the monastic life is considered higher than the laity life, for the monastics must strictly obey and practice some established regulations that the laity does not have.[11]

The monastic institution is a symbol of religious authority and leadership in Buddhism. The role of Buddhist monks and nuns is to preserve Buddhist traditions, to become religious teachers, and to guide the laity. Accordingly, the monastics immensely focus on their spiritual path, but they also have to use their knowledge and experience to guide the laity. Meanwhile, the laity ought to sustain the continuance of the monastics' life by giving food and money. The *Sangha* also gets donations from the government and civil organizations.[12]

Thus, in Buddhism, one must personally participate in the *Sangha* and experience the monastic life to gain religious authority and leadership. In this respect, the religious leadership of Buddhism suggests the institutionalized leadership model that is significantly dependent on the *Sangha*. Accordingly, to become a monk or nun, a Buddhist must undergo "two levels of formal ordination rituals", namely "novice ordination" and "higher ordination". Nevertheless, there is a

[9] Goldberg and Charpentier, 16.
[10] Goldberg and Charpentier, 16.
[11] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 88–89.
[12] Harvey, 89.

debate over whether women can pursue higher ordination. While Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism do not allow higher ordination for women, Mahayana Buddhism allows women to obtain higher ordination at various ages.[13]

In conclusion, while Hindu religious leadership is non-institutionalized, Buddhist religious leadership, by contrast, is institutionalized. The former is based on the existence of public recognition, and the latter is based on the recognition of the *Sangha.* The question remains whether women can obtain equal status and position of religious leadership as men in the two religions, which I shall examine in the following sections.

The Ambivalence of Traditions

The present section examines how women's religious leadership is presented in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Hence, we have to deal with historical accounts represented in textual sources. From several pieces of literature, I found that both Hindu and Buddhist traditions are ambivalent towards women's religious leadership. The ambivalence encompasses how the nature of women is constructed in the two traditions.

The existence of female *gurus* is scarcely discussed in Hindu traditions. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether female *gurus* had equal status and position as those of male *gurus* in the pre-modern era. Besides, among the main characteristics of Hinduism is diversity. It has diversely myriad images, rituals, ideas, and traditions. Its diversity encompasses the status of women within Hindu traditions. Thus, according to Leona M. Anderson, it seems impossible to present Hindu women's image comprehensively.[14]

It might be impossible for women to be a *guru* due to the dominantly patriarchal narratives of nature and roles of women represented in Hindu traditions. As mentioned earlier, the Hindu *dharma doctrine* significantly determines women's status and roles. Women's *dharma* is believed to be chaste, loyal, and subservient to their husbands deemed as gods. Therefore, women's roles were commonly associated with the domestic domain and thus excluded from the public sphere. Such patriarchal nature and women's roles are represented mainly in the image of Hindu goddesses and "Brahminical texts", such as the texts of *Veda*, its component part: *Upaniṣad*, and *The Law of Manu.*[15]

However, some scholars found that female *gurus* had existed even since the Vedic era. Ellison Banks—quoted by Marie Therese Charpentier—argues that in the Vedic times, female teachers were popularly recognized in society, and thus it could be concluded that teaching was an

[13] Will Deming, *Understanding Religions of the World* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 96–97.

[14] Anderson and Young, *Women and Religious Traditions*, 1.

[15] Bose Mandakranta, *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions*, *Routledge Hindu Studies Series*, 2010, 58.

available profession for both men and women. According to Charpentier, to support this argument, scholars refer to Hindu women philosophers in the Vedic time, such as Gargī Vāchaknavī, Vaḍavā Prātītheyi, and Sulabhā Maitreyī. Based on these small pieces of evidence, scholars confidently conclude that in the Vedic time, women had "high religious status".[16]

Another scholar, Karen Pechilis, argues that women had become *a guru* in ancient times, as said in the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Tripura Rahasya*. Nevertheless, their roles were restricted in the private sphere, i.e. they became *gurus* for their families. By contrast, in the Tantric and *bhakti* traditions, it is said that female *gurus* gained public recognition, although there was a tension in which women's religious leadership was considered to be contrary to women's *dharma*. Pechilis also refers to the stories of female *gurus* in the sixteenth through the nineteenth century who struggle to overcome the tension between pursuing their spiritual path and *dharma*.[17]

Due to the ambivalence of Hindu traditions, scholars debate how the nature and role of women are constructed in Hindu traditions. Scholars like Leona M. Anderson, Mandakranta Bose, and Nancy Falk argue that Hinduism is a patriarchal religion in nature as manifested within Hindu textual sources. They frame their study on women in Hindu textual sources from the perspective of feminism. Accordingly, they significantly base their argument on the dominant narrative of Hindu women's nature and roles which were subordinated and marginalized by the Brahmanic patriarchy, while the marginal narratives showing the high religious status of women as mentioned above are ignored and considered insignificant.[18]

On the contrary, other scholars like Stephanie W. Jamison, Marie Therese Charpentier, and Sharada Sugirtharajah criticize and question the feminist claim of the construction of Hindu women. Their most argument is that the textual-based study of Hindu women is not reliable, for it tends to narrow and distort the actual reality of Hindu women over a long period.[19] Sharada Sugirtharajah, for example, argues that Hindu textual sources should be understood along with non-textual sources such as "the visual, oral, and performing arts, which offers positive images of women".[20]

Meanwhile, similar to Hindu traditions, Buddhist traditions are ambivalent about whether female nuns have equal status and position as those of male monks. Peter Harvey concedes that

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[16] Goldberg and Charpentier, "Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership," 63–64.

[17] Pechilis, *Graced. Guru Hindu Female Gurus India United States*, 26.

[18] Anderson and Young, *Women and Religious Traditions*, 6–20; Mandakranta, *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions*, 58.

[19] Goldberg and Charpentier, "Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership," 65.

[20] Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2002, 100.

the status and roles of early Buddhist women should be understood along with how women were conceived in the Indian society in which the Buddha lived.[21] Several scholars, such as I. B. Horner, Eva K. Neumaier, and Harvey,[22] argue that the early Buddhists challenged the Indian structure and norm, putting women in the domestic realm. Those scholars reveal how in early Buddhism (400-200 BCE), Buddhist women had equal status and position as Buddhist men. The ultimate concern is to attain enlightenment, *nirvana*, which has nothing to do with sexual identities.

The equality also encompassed the status and roles of early Buddhist nuns. Based on the ancient document of 73 poems narrating the stories of early nuns, Neumaier states that it is surprising that the early nuns enjoyed equal status and position as those of monks. Nuns had access to pursue their enlightenment (*nirvana*), to participate within the monastic institution (*Sangha*), and even to interpret *Tripitaká* authoritatively. The gender difference was insignificant in early Buddhism. Prājapatī, the Buddha's sister, is said to be the first woman who was ordained as a nun.[23]

Nevertheless, in the later development of Buddhism, the situation changed significantly. The status and roles of Buddhist nuns were in decline. Women were socially and politically subordinated. Buddhist women were allowed to become nuns unless they had to accept and obey "the eight chief rules" the Buddha ascribed, which greatly benefited the monks. Theravada Buddhism, following a strict interpretation of the rules, does not provide full ordination for women. According to Neumaier, the egalitarianism of Buddhism was significantly changed when the political system at the time utilized the monastic institution for the sake of its political interests. The patriarchal structure, in turn, affected the monastery.[24]

Compared to Hindu traditions, the early Buddhist traditions do not regard women's ontological nature as significant. Presumably, this is because Buddhism emerged in response to the Indian structure and norm, as mentioned above. Besides, unlike Hinduism, Buddhism has a monastic institution that authoritatively determines Buddhists' religious life. Therefore, unlike female *gurus* struggling to overcome the intersection between their *dharma* and spiritual path, Buddhist nuns, particularly within Theravada traditions, have to deal with the established rules of the *Sangha*.

In my viewpoint, it is misleading to regard the ambivalence of women's nature and religious leadership as a form of contradiction and inconsistency in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Religious traditions and practices have always been embedded in social, cultural, political, and

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[21] Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 354.

[22] Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions*, 83–84; Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 356–57.

[23] Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions*, 83–87.

[24] Neumaier, 88.

historical contexts. Rather than examining whether the two religions are patriarchal in nature, it is significant to acknowledge that there is a dynamic pertaining to women's nature, roles, and religious leadership within the two traditions. Although the historical evidence of the existence of early female *gurus* and Buddhist nuns, who enjoyed equal status and position, are not dominant, they prove that challenging religious patriarchy is not relatively modern.

Religious Reform: Challenging Patriarchy

Since the twentieth century, there have been significant changes and developments regarding women's religious leadership within Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Scholarly studies have featured that the existence of Hindu and Buddhist women religious leaders has been widespread across the world. Male-oriented teachings and religiously structured patriarchy have been challenged and criticized. Hindu and Buddhist traditions that promote the subordination of women have been reformed.

Referring to Nancy folks, Marie Therese Charpentier states that the socio-political and religious changes during the British colonial period in India significantly contributed to enhancing and promoting the appearance of women religious leaders in India. In that period, women widely gained access to pursue their roles in the public sphere. They began to study Sanskrit, read Hindu scriptures, perform Vedic rituals, practice renunciation, and even have their *āśrams*, the academy for studying Hindu traditions. The existence of female *gurus* was gradually visible and gained public recognition.[25]

Interestingly, those significant changes were also supported and promoted by Hindu men. Their engagement with Western ideas and ways of life considered incompatible with Hindu traditions had resulted in the shift of religious authorities. Women then were encouraged to preserve the traditions. Women's participation in "the national independence movement" led by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s also contributed to the emergence of female *gurus* and Hindu women in the public sphere.[26]

Similar to Hinduism, the emergence of European colonialism in Buddhist countries contributed to the change and development of Buddhist religious authority and leadership. In that context, the existence of the Buddhist *Sangha* was in decline. On the one hand, under the colonial authority, the *Sangha* lost its financial, political, and social basis. On the other hand, Buddhist women gained access to pursue a better education. The accumulation of these factors, in turn, significantly shapes Buddhist women's awareness to improve the status of Buddhist nuns. The

[25] Goldberg and Charpentier, "Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership," 66.

[26] Goldberg and Charpentier, 67–68.

most critical issue is demanding full ordination for the nuns, particularly within the Theravada tradition.[27]

Then how do female *gurus* and Buddhist nuns deal with their respective traditions that promote biased images and subordination of women? Based on seventy female *gurus* in contemporary India, Charpentier elucidates how they express their religious authority and leadership. According to Charpentier, rather than reforming the Hindu traditions, those female *gurus "*oppose and discard scriptural restrictions" in favor of demanding equality in the public realm. The doctrine of caste, for example, is firmly rejected. They insist that "spirituality is beyond castes and creeds".[28]

As discussed previously, the religious leadership of Hinduism is charismatic, non-institutionalized, and highly dependent on public recognition. Therefore, those female *gurus* prefer to maintain their charisma to legitimate their religious leadership in the public realm. For them, personal spiritual experience as the manifestation of charisma is more legitimate and authoritative than what is said in the scriptures. "The spiritual authority" provides legitimacy for them to gain public recognition and trust.[29] In this regard, one might question: what is the function of the scriptures? Do the scriptures legally bind? According to Charpentier, the *guru* tradition is essentially based on "oral spiritual teaching" instead of scriptural traditions. Accordingly, it is not surprising that contemporary female *gurus* emphasize their charismatic leadership rather than referring to scriptural traditions. Therefore, as Sharada Sugirtharajah argues, relying merely on Hindu texts is misleading in studying the construction of female *gurus*.[30]

Meanwhile, Buddhist nuns in the Theravada tradition have to deal with the challenge of a male-dominated *Sangha*. As mentioned above, while Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions provide full ordination for women, Theravada tradition does not, following the strict interpretation of "the eight chief rules".[31] Therefore, reforming the Buddhist traditions is imperative for gaining greater gender equality and full of ordination for women. Bhikkhu Bodhi's article, *The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Theravada Tradition*, reforms the restriction of full ordination for women. Pointing out "the ancient mandate" of the Buddha's teachings and reflecting the challenge of contemporary context, Bodhi argues that full ordination for women is legally legitimate.[32]

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[27] Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions*, 101–2.

[28] Goldberg and Charpentier, "Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism: A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership," 94, 172.

[29] Goldberg and Charpentier, 167.

[30] Sugirtharajah, "Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns," 99.

[31] Neumaier, *Women in Buddhist Traditions, in Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young (Ed.), Women and Religious Traditions*, 90.

[32] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (The Teachings of the Buddha)* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2016), 107–14.

In comparison, the different model of religious leadership between Hinduism and Buddhism determines how female *gurus* and Buddhist nuns challenge and respond to the religious patriarchy and traditions that offer a negative image of women. Hindu charismatic and non-institutionalized model of religious leadership constitutes that female *gurus* put more emphasis on personal spiritual enlightenment, on the one hand, and ignoring the scriptural traditions, on the other hand. Meanwhile, the institutionalized Buddhist model of religious leadership constitutes that Buddhist nuns in Theravada tradition should reform their religious traditions in response to the biased interpretation of traditionalist monks. In that context, hermeneutical contestation is taking place. Hence, reinterpretation toward greater gender equality and justice is significant.

CONCLUSION

Hinduism and Buddhism provide spaces and occasions for women to be religious leaders. However, both Hindu female gurus and Buddhist nuns must strive to eradicate patriarchal structures and values within their respective religious traditions and communities. Both Hindu and Buddhist traditions are ambivalent about female religious leadership. Throughout history, both female gurus and Buddhist nuns had enjoyed equal status and position as men, though their historical narratives were marginal due to the dominant patriarchal narratives within the two religious traditions.

While the religious leadership of Hinduism is charismatic, non-institutionalized, and highly dependent on public recognition, the religious leadership of Buddhism, by contrast, is institutionalized and significantly determined by the established rules of Buddhist monastic institutions (Sangha). The divergent models of religious leadership imply how female religious leaders are recognized. Female gurus are publicly recognized through their charisma, which manifests in their spiritual knowledge and personal enlightenment. Meanwhile, Buddhist nuns, particularly in Theravada Buddhism, have to challenge the patriarchal monks to be institutionally recognized.

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