

Diversity, Inequality and Inclusion: Status of Tribal in Public Education System, Odisha

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Abstract

Our society and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse which through enormous challenges before development agencies to address diversity without biases, prejudice and discrimination. Though diversity offers enriching experiences of learning and mutual benefits to different groups however India has not been very successful in harnessing the potential of diversity. Education being the most important instrument of modernization and nation-building has not been very successful in recognising and incorporating diversity in teaching-learning processes. Development indicators suggest that traditionally excluded groups such as the tribals continued to experience discrimination and exclusion. Tribals are lagging behind the rest in educational attainment due to hierarchical and discriminatory educational system. Schools attended by tribal children are located at the bottom of the school hierarchy and receive limited resources and attention. These children receive poor quality education under substandard infrastructure which diminishes their academic performance. With the help of secondary data, the paper examines the status of tribal education vis-a-vis diversity policy of the educational status and experience of the tribal students in Odisha. It examines whether the state is implementing a policy of integration or implicitly pursuing a policy of assimilation through tribal education.

Keywords: Tribal, diversity, inequality, public education, inclusion, integration, assimilation.

1. Diversity and Inequality:

India stand as one of the most diverse countries in the world with people diverse religion, culture, language, ethnicity and caste have made this country the place of dwelling. The constitution of India recognises diversity and confers fundamental rights on all citizens independent of their identity. It also has special provisions for minority and weaker sections to protect, preserve and practice their distinct socio-cultural practices. Within the diversity there exists unity which entails the co-existence of different socio-cultural groups within given geo-political settings. There are greater values in diversity from which different social groups could learn and mutually benefit from each other's best practices. Technically diversity underlines collective difference rather than inequalities, yet the ground reality suggests otherwise. The popular notion of 'unity in diversity' concealed the widening socio-economic disparities along the fault lines of social identity. In reality, the socio-economic and political inequalities are in sync with the social diversity, as some groups have better political representation, have control over resources as well as better access to state institutions than the marginalised group such as tribals. The popular notion of 'unity in diversity' is a catchphrase that concealed the growing socio-economic disparities through false consciousness. Through dominant discourse relentlessly praise the rhetoric of unity in diversity- a manufactured reality while the diversity has been the fault lines of inequality in India. All development indicators clearly underlined the fact that how weaker sections and tribals in particular, remain deprived of education and subsequently the accruing economic benefits but wilfully such issues were ignored in the discourse of development and social diversity.

According to the 2011 census, India has 104.4 million tribal population which is about 8.2 percent of the total population of the country. There are 461 tribal communities in India, out of which 174 are identified as sub-groups according to the Anthropological Survey of India. Though conventionally tribes are perceived as a homogeneous group however in reality they represent an enormous diversity. The tribal groups differ from other disadvantaged groups in terms of their culture, language traits, ecological settings, livelihood, level of development and social stratification. The conventional understanding of Tribals as a homogeneous group is something of a misnomer. "Tribal communities in India are enormously diverse and heterogeneous, differing widely with regard to language, physical characteristics, demographic traits, means of livelihood, and cultural exposure to the wider world" (Xaxa, 2008, p.123). Tribals are at different stages of socio-economic development while some groups have been benefitted from various welfare and development schemes initiated by the state for the welfare of the weaker sections while a sizable section of them still remain backward. However, invariably tribals are located at the bottom of the socio-economic development. They continued to lag behind other groups

in terms of literacy and educational attainments. Even after 70 years of enforcement of the constitution and the implementation of 'tribal development policy' the socio-economic conditions of the sizable tribal population remain poor. In fact, poverty is concentrated in certain social groups and disproportionately found among the tribals (Radhakrishna and Ray, 2005). The uneven and discriminatory policy of the state is one of the leading reasons for their backwardness. Spatial disparities compounded their difficulties further as some of these groups live in remote scattered isolated hamlets without basic infrastructure. The historical injustices coupled with contemporary discriminatory practices have deprived the tribes from benefitting from modern education and economy. Despite decades of enforcement of these policies, the educational disparities between the tribes and non-tribes remain significantly wide.

Education is an important instrument of economic progress and social change and the status of education significantly influences the socio-economic status. Poor literacy rate and low educational attainment have been the important reason behind the backwardness of tribals. Educationally, tribes are the most backward section that lags far behind non-tribal groups. Despite various welfare and affirmative policies and enforcement of the constitution for over seven decades the tribal continue to remain educationally backward. The government has undertaken multiple special initiatives under 'tribal development policy' to facilitate their educational development but most of these policies fall short in achieving the intended objectives.

An enduring popular expression about the significance of education is that 'education is the backbone of the country'. But behind this political rhetoric hardly ever any government makes concerted efforts to change the widespread inequality in education. The existing inter-group economic disparities are outcomes of the current unequal system of education where the well off section was provided a relatively better education than the marginalised section in the society. Instead of making an effort to provide a quality education through equal funding for each student and with a uniform school system, the state makes the uneven distribution of resources and attention to public funded schools. The traditionally excluded groups such as the tribals are marginalised further since schools where the majority of the tribal children enrolled receive meagre funds and attention from the state. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the government schools in rural areas and Ashrams schools which are the prime destinations for children of deprived sections where tribal students receive poor education under inferior infrastructures. The hierarchical school system is in sync with the graded inequality in the wider society which continues to produce and reproduce the socio-economic inequality through education.

There is an underlying interconnection between social diversity and economic inequality. Education being the most important instrument of modernization and nation-building has an important role to address issues pertaining to diversity and inequality. Therefore, it is important to understand how the government school system acknowledges and accommodates the wide diversity found in Indian society. With the help of primary and secondary data, the paper examines the status of tribal education vis-a-vis diversity policy in the state of Odisha. It examines whether the state is implementing a policy of integration or implicitly pursuing a policy of assimilation through tribal education. Do school curriculum, pedagogy and the demographic composition of teachers and students reflect diversity in school?

2. Socio-Economic Condition of Tribals in Odisha

Odisha has a diverse tribal population; as per the Census 2011, the state of Odisha has the third-highest percentage of tribal population in the country which stands at 9590756. They constitute 22.85% of the total population of the state and contribute 9.17% to the total tribal population of the country. The state has the unique distinction of having 62 different tribal communities out of which 13 identified as particularly vulnerable tribal groups who are more isolated, backward and deprived among all. Furthermore, there are 21 tribal languages and 74 dialects in the state which shows the huge contribution of language diversity. The Scheduled Tribe is one of the least urbanised states with 95 percent population resides in dispersed rural villages and hilly regions. They suffered from social, educational and economic backwardness due to geo-historical reasons, discriminatory state policy and social prejudice. Despite their numerical strength, they continue to lag critically behind the general population in all development indicators. The majority of the tribal families are poor and live the below poverty line. In fact, according to the Economic Survey of Odisha, about "41.39 percent of SC and ST communities in rural Odisha were below poverty line in 2011-12" (Odisha Economic Survey, 2016-17). The reasons for their socio-economic backwardness are diverse but the low educational attainment has been one of the leading reasons for their lagging behind the others.

Over the decade's literacy rate of the tribals has been increasing steadily as it has reached to 52. 24 percent in 2011 from a mere 7.36 percent in 1961. Certainly this does not reflect the intergroup dynamics as there is literacy gaps between different tribal groups besides the gender gaps (22.5 percent). Though in terms of literacy rate, the tribals made some gains but the overall education attainment continues to remain fairly wide. It is observed that the educational attainment gap between the tribals and non-tribals increases along with the grade of schoolings and reaches the extreme at the level of higher education. In fact, with the progression from primary to a higher level of schooling and subsequently to higher education, there is a gradual decline in the GER of the tribals. The GER at the elementary stage was 105.95 percent which declined to 68.43 percent at secondary level

but the enrolment witnessed a substantial decline at higher education which is just 12.5 percent in 2017-18 (Educational Statistics at a Glance, 2018).

Despite different police and programmes to check dropout, increase retention and bring back children to schools and facilitate their learning, a significant number of tribal children continue to be out of school. According to Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), in 2018-19 more than 52 percent of out-of-school children of the state belonged to tribal groups (OPEPA, 2018-19). The dropout rate of tribal at the elementary level was 7.60 percent in 2018-19 and it increased to 8.22 percent at the secondary level in the corresponding period (OPEPA, 2018-19). Due to regular dropout in successive stages, the educational attainment remained low among the tribals which significantly undermine their educational benefits and only a microscopic minority could reach the higher level of education. An apt argument has been made by Benjamin, “if we cannot reduce the dropout rate we will not be able to think of higher education” (Benjamin, 2008, p-631) and this is an apt reflection of the tribals in higher education Odisha. Only a small section of the tribal managed to reach up to higher education due to the continuous dropout and withdrawal from schooling. Since higher education is the source of social mobility, the vast majority of the tribals are deprived of the privilege since only a small section manages to reach higher education.

On top of this, the state government has initiated a retrogressive policy popularly known as ‘Rationalization of schools’, under which the government is closing down thousands of schools with low enrolment status. Data suggests that the policy is not only violating the objective of RTE of free and compulsory education for all but also increasing the social and spatial disparities which ultimately forcing thousands of children dropout, especially in remote rural areas of the state. In fact, it threw an additional challenge to the large segment of the rural population since thousands of rural habitations do not have elementary schools. Odisha is one of the least urbanized states with 95 percent of tribals population living in dispersed rural areas and still hundreds of eligible rural habitations without schools facility. Such as according to the Panchayat Raj Department of the State, there are 18,851 villages without primary schools and 32,008 villages without upper primary schools. The government schools located in rural areas are largely attended by Dalit and Tribals children which are the only means of education available to them. Under the policy closing down these school’s closure will further exclude the already excluded groups. As Bag and Swetashree (2022) underline, “The policy has exacerbated the existing disparity along the axes of regional, spatial, caste/community, and gender” (p.96).

3. Between Diversity and Integration:

Diversity is a fundamental characteristic of Indian society. These differences have been the results of various geo-political, historical and the confluence of socio-economic factors. Though through the history, tribal identity has been subjected to continual alternation both by the state and by socio-cultural elites but in recent times, the tribal middle class becoming assertive about their identity and rights enshrined in the constitution. As Xaxa argued, “With the advent of education and the threat posed to tribal ways of living by other dominant groups and demands imposed by development, the tribal identity and articulation has been a process directed from within the tribal community, spearheaded by a growing middle class” (Xaxa, 2005, 1363). This assertion of separate identity is not merely a demand for political autonomy but Xaxa argued it is to ensure “the protection and development of tribal language, customs and culture”. The constitution of India recognises the diversity and confers fundamental rights on all citizens independent of their identity. In addition to the general provisions, there are special provisions for tribals, such as article 29, “the protection of tribal language, dialect, and culture” and Article 350A of India’s Constitution grants the right of every child to receive education in his or her mother tongue; article 41 under the Directive Principles of State Policy where special provisions could be made to promote the educational and economic development of the tribals.

The state after having recognised the distinct socio-cultural practices of the tribes have adopted certain policy otherwise known as ‘tribal policy’ for their socio-economic development. These policies recognise the distinct socio-cultural practices of the tribes and introduce a policy of integration to enhance the socio-economic development of the tribals. However, experience suggests that diversity policies have failed to recognise the distinctive and separate identities of the tribes. The state operates under the assumption that without giving up the socio-cultural practices, economic development is not possible for the tribals. Therefore, in order to make economic progress, the tribals must shun the important constitutive of their identity. Here it is important to underline that while without negotiating with the socio-cultural practices development is possible for all other groups but for the tribals it comes with the cost of their socio-cultural practices. Instead of formulating policy taking into account the socio-cultural and economic practices of the tribals the state policy demands the tribals to make themselves relevant to the development policy. This approach of state is no exception in the domain of tribal education.

Taking a culturally responsive approach to teaching benefits students of all social groups therefore UNESCO advocate promotion of diversity, as it underlines, “Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It

aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem” (UNESCO 2005, cited in Acedo C. et al., 2009, p.228). Mutual reorganization to diversity and fostering inclusion in education prepare students to adapt to a new evolving social reality. Diversity is a social reality and it should recognise and reflect in educational institutions and curriculum. In fact, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognised that “the knowledge of the rich diversity of India should be imbibed first hand by learners”. (p.54). Therefore, the NEP lays significant emphasis on diversity, “respect for diversity and respect for the local context in all curriculum, pedagogy, and policy, always keeping in mind that education is a concurrent subject” (p.5). The NEP recognised that the school curriculum should “include more detailed knowledge of various cultures, religions, languages, gender identities, etc. to sensitize and develop respect for diversity. Any biases and stereotypes in school curriculum will be removed, and more material will be included that is relevant and relatable to all communities” (p.28).

The disjunction between policy recommendation for diversity and integration and the implementation on the ground is adequately evident. Though technically the state has adopted the diversity policy and therefore operates with the principle of integration rather than assimilation. However, the integration policy has been grossly overlooked and the state implicitly implements the policy of assimilation. In line of the diversity and integration policy, the state has a branch of schools known as Ashram schools. This history of Ashram school goes back to pre-independent era where the philanthropist and benevolent opened the school to ‘civilised’ the tribal ‘savage’. In an attempt to incorporate them in the ‘mainstream’ the children were shifted to ashram schools and the immediate outcome of the transfer is that there is ‘cultural discontinuity’ between the school environment and the social life of the children back home (Xaxa, 2014). This despite recommendations by various committees and commissions to design culturally sensitive curriculum the essential recommendations were willfully overlooked.

Instead of making education relevant to the experiential concerns of the tribes, the current curriculums expect the tribals to make themselves relevant to education. The school’s lessons are divorced from their real-life situations and students found it hard to connect to the lesson imparted in the schools. Succeeding in the prevailing academic circumstances demands giving up one’s own cultural, language and value system since school lessons involve more than mere learning of the curriculum. Learning lessons in school demands unlearning of the important constitutive of tribal identity and therefore the tribal students undergo a difficult transition from his socio-cultural identity to a ‘Sanskari identity’. As Committee underlined, “Ashram proposition was opening of the ‘Sanskari Kendras’ to re-orient children in upper-caste Hindu cultural norms. Such importance assigned to residential school concept, led, later on, to the tendency of Ashramization of the whole program of tribal education” (Xaxa, 2014, p. 160). Though the official stated position of the education policies and schemes are culturally sensitive and curriculum integration but implicitly the education system undermines the tribal diversity and pursues the policy of assimilation. The following section discusses in detail the ideology and the processes of implicit assimilation carried out through school education.

4. The Pedagogy of Assimilation:

The academic debate on assimilation and integration goes back to the pre-independence era but the constitution has provided adequate provisions to safeguard the culture, language and tradition of the tribes. Committees, commissions and education policies do recognise the importance of diversity in school education. In fact, high level tribal committees and commissions such as Elwin report 1960, Dhebar report 1961, V. Xaxa report 2014 and NEP 2020 acknowledged the importance of tribal culture, language and religion in relation to imparting education tribals and recommended for ‘textbooks to be produced in at least the major tribal languages’. By and large the state policy in respect to tribes is “one of integration rather than assimilation. Although the meaning of integration may be understood in different ways, the underlying assumption is that it provides space for diversity, unlike the policy of assimilation, which extends no such space” (Xaxa, 2008, p.79). However, in spite of the announcement of lofty ideas and recognition of separate and unique tribal socio-cultural practices in the constitutions and policy documents, the actual classroom situation has stirred in a reverse direction.

The school curriculum and the pedagogy undermine the potential benefits of diversity, inclusion and democratic learning. As Gupta and Padel argued that “there was much of great value in indigenous cultures from which mainstream society could actually learn, with mutual benefit to both sides” (Gupta and Padel, 2018, p.23). However, the ethnocentric pedagogical practices undermine the tribal culture and disregard the potential of mutual benefits from inclusive learning. The ‘cultural racism’ undermines the potential of mutual respect and benefits as the dominant culture was priorities over the tribal culture and world views. Thus scholars argued “Educational curricula were developed around the language, culture, traditions, histories and values of each state’s dominant sub-national community, and tribal people had no alternative but to accept a kind of education that was alien to them” (Xaxa, 2021). The upper caste culture, language and value system get priority over all other social groups especially the system is more adversarial towards the tribal culture. The underlying assumption is that tribal culture is inferior to that of the upper caste culture and therefore the former must be purged from the sanitized educational settings. Therefore the school lessons are imparted in ‘standard’ language instead of mother tongue which

compounded the learning difficulties of the first generation school-goers and adversely impact the scholastic performance and motivation of the students.

4.1 Language: Article 350A of India's Constitution grants the right of every child to receive education in his or her mother tongue and the Article 29 of the constitution promises the linguistic and cultural minorities to conserve their language and culture. Various committees and commissions also have made similar suggestions regarding the medium of instructions. However, the commitment to implement the constitutional provisions to safeguard the tribal language is few and far between on the ground. Xaxa argued, "Education in all states and union territories, even at the primary level, has been imparted in the language of the dominant community" (Xaxa, 2008: 80). The 62 different tribal communities found in Odisha constitutes 23 percent of the total population of the state. Furthermore, there are 21 tribal languages and 74 dialects in the state which shows the huge diversity of tribal language. Policy recommendation for making mother-tongue the medium of instructions has been grossly undermined and hardly ever been implemented. Gupta and Padel argued, "A prime reason is that recruiting non-tribal teachers in schools for tribal children, whose languages they do not know, has remained the norm from then until now...the fact that fewer than ten percent of teachers in tribal schools were from Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities" (Gupta & Padel, 2018, p.28).

The languages in India are hierarchized and reflect the caste and power structure in the society. The language dominant groups/ upper caste figured in the 8th scheduled while the mother tongue of the marginalised communities are relegated to the edges and hence neither figure in the constitution nor being made a medium of instruction in schools. "In fact, there are a number of tribal languages such as Gondi, Oraon/Kurukh that have more than a million speakers and more speakers than Sanskrit and Sindhi but have not yet been accorded any official status" (Bag, 2020, p.53). The mother-tongue of the tribes and other small and remote communities are systematically pushed to the edge of extinction. Nambissan aptly argued that "the singling out of some languages as the 'standard' and appropriate media of education sets aside the rest as 'non-standard' and inappropriate for schooling" (Nambissan, 1994, p.2748). There are two tribal languages namely Bodo and Santali found a place in the 8th scheduled of the constitution since 2004 but there have not been any substantive accruing outcomes. For instance, the Santhali has been introduced in certain primary schools in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar district of Odisha but the teachers and the pupils faced difficulties in learning. Moreover, it has not been included in the school curriculum as modern Indian Language and in the Odisha Administrative Services since it included in the 8th Schedule.

Tribal dialects are forbidden in school settings and speaking in tribal tongue causes humiliation and invites punishment. Due to the fear of sanction the students suppressed their internal terrain of thought, ideas and agency, as "they were punished by the teachers and humiliated by the students even if it was just a Freudian slip" (Bag, 2020, p.119). Studies across the states have underlined these practices where children in ashram schools are often systematically punished for speaking their own languages (Nambissa, 1994 & 2000).

A 'heavily Sanskritized syllabus' and a lack of Adivasi input into the management of ashram schools are further evidence of an assimilationist agenda that largely ignores inputs from local cultures and economies. Schools symbolise upper caste middle class values and the vast majority of school teachers and administrative staff were non-tribals even the tribal teachers and staff have internalised the ideology of the upper caste. Therefore, the antipathy towards the tribals is inherent in the pedagogical attitude of the schools. Due to decades of neglect "the country losing over 220 languages in the last 50 years... and UNESCO has declared 197 Indians as endangered" (NEP, 2020, p.53). The education system has pushed hundreds of tribal languages are in the verge of extinction due to habitual neglect to adopt them as the medium of instruction. Reorganization and inclusion of these languages in the education system will preserve the endangered language from extinction and the indigenous knowledge, culture and wisdom of the tribals.

4.2 Religion: In tribal society, religion is a force to be reckoned with. It is an essential part of the everyday tribal life-the way in which they think, act, feel and interact with all animate and inanimate objects. Religion/belief system, language, worldviews and other constitutive of tribal identity are proscribed in the school premises. In an attempt to 'detrribalize' the indigenous groups, children are removed from their families for an extended period of time and they were discouraged to practice their own religion at the residential schools. Gupta and Padel argued, "in order to achieve assimilation, children had to be completely removed from the influence of their families" (p.31), the school imposed a "ban on pupils practising their own religion at school. Often tribal languages and many other customs were also forbidden, with severe punishments and humiliation for offending children, in a conscious attempt to 'detrribalize' the population" (Gupta & Padel, 2018, p.24). Tribal religions are systematically erased from children's memories by systematically depriving e them of learning their religion in school curriculum and pedagogy and slowly initiated into Hindu religious rituals and practices.

The religious freedom guaranteed to Tribes under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution have been wilfully ignored in educational settings. Relentlessly agenda of Hinduisation of tribals are pushed through multiple directions in public-funded schools. Widespread Hindutva orientation is evident in ashram schools, "The Hindutva element in many tribal schools exerts a form of assimilationism, based on the view that tribal culture is, or should

be, based on Hinduism, which needs to be taught more systematically. For example, Sanskrit is often promoted, even as tribal languages are actively discouraged” (Gupta & Padel, 2018, P.34). There is elaborate Hindu religious ritual and practice in Ashram schools. From the early morning prayers to the evening assembly all begins with a prayer and as it concludes the students habitually touch the feet of teachers to seek blessings from them. Though the tribals have elaborate religious and cultural festivals however none of them figures in the cultural and religious calendar of the schools. However, all government-run schools including Ashram schools celebrate Swaraswati and Ganesh puja elaborately. These pujas are presided over by Brahmin priests who conduct all these rituals in Sanskrit. The paraphernalia of the dominant religion generates considerable pressure on the tribal pupils to conform to the practice in order to be members of the school community. Tribal pupils experience enormous difficulties in adjusting to a new cultural environment at the beginning of school and encounter the different difficulties in adjusting to their own community after completion or dropping out of school.

Conclusion:

Indian is one of the most diverse nations in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, language and food habits. However, our proclamation and celebration of diversity is purely a cosmetic exercise which celebrated in the certain enclave of socio-cultural lives but does not go beyond the superficial appearance. The major drawback of the rich diversity is the inequality along the line of diversity where a close examination reveals huge disparities-economic, political/power, educational and social status. The lower level of education became a major obstacle in the path of economic development. Development indicators suggest that there are huge inter-group disparities- in terms of literacy, education, health and sanitation. According to the government of Odisha, there are 18,851 villages in the state without primary schools and 32,008 villages without upper primary schools. In the remote tribal hamlets, the schools are located in far off places where even the small children have to travel a long distance to attend school. Tribals being one of the least urbanized communities have access to schools which not only lack basic infrastructure but also don't have trained teachers and consequently, are deprived of the quality of education. For instance, stunting and wasting due to undernutrition, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are widespread in the state especially among the ST/SC in Odisha. Suri argued that almost half of the under-five children from tribal communities in Odisha are underweight, and 46 percent are stunted (Suri, 2019).

Educationists have recognised the significance of diversity in classrooms and curricular integration for inclusive learning, peaceful coexistence and for the mutual reorganization and respect. Therefore, “Inclusion of local culture, folklore and history in the curriculum can help in building confidence of tribal children and enhance the relevance of education in their lives” (Xaxa, 2014). Diversity in the classroom teaches students to appreciate different perspective and eradicate stigma and prejudice against minorities. A diverse classroom enriches students' learning experience and teaches important life skills to learn to live with the multitude of socio-cultural diversities. It helps students to learn about other cultures, languages, lifestyles and encouraging them to be intercultural sensitive and prepares students to enter adulthood without biases and prejudices. Dr. Ambedkar envisioned an equal society and argued “education is the right weapon to cut the social slavery and it is education which will enlighten the downtrodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom” (Sirsval, 2016, p.33). The purpose of education is to strive for a more equitable, democratic and just society and school represent the microcosm of the larger society and therefore it has the responsibility to be an exemplar. Without equity and equality, popular slogans, like ‘unity in diversity’ lack substance and essence hence the state has the responsibility to ensure substantive justice without undermining diversity. Tribals have constitutional rights to protect and preserve their culture, religion and language and the state must take their socio-cultural practices into considerations in the events of development interventions.

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