

PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF SOCIOLOGY

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I would like to discuss in this paper some of the problems and perspectives that have bothered me in my study of sociology spanning a period of over four decades. Several issues have been raised about the nature of sociology as a discipline. It has been questioned whether the liberal social science approach yields any results in understanding social reality. The hard core approach which takes into account social relations of production has also been advocated as an alternative. Then again, it has been said that sociologists are reactionary because of the undue emphasis they place on solidarity, integration and equilibrium and the radical progressive approach has been suggested as a substitute. Similarly, it has often been asserted that sociology is a soft discipline indulging in description rather than providing analysis. Is sociology a residual discipline which is peripheral to hard disciplines such as economics, or is it a multidisciplinary study? What should be emphasised--a qualitative perceptive understanding of social reality or quantitative data and mathematical precision enabling predictions about the future? Does sociology promote a purely academic kind of enquiry or does it have implications for action? What is the use of sociological knowledge if it does not help in solving problems and in establishing a social order based on social justice and equality on the one hand and human dignity and liberty on the other? As a matter of fact, the last two values--human dignity and liberty--are not as sharply emphasised as the other two values are. What is the nature of sociology: Is it theoretical or atheoretical, historical or ahistorical, descriptive or prescriptive, conservative or radical?

There are certain questions on issues specific to the Indian social reality. Should one emphasise the text or the contextual reality, folk and the oral tradition or the sophisticated written 'great tradition'? What should be the unit of study--micro or macro, simple or complex? What are the relevant methodologies and theories? Should one use different theories to understand the multi-faceted Indian reality? How much importance should be attached to colonial rule in understanding the existing problems of Indian society? Then again there are various dichotomies like rural-urban, touchable-untouchable, Hindu-non-Hindu, organised-unorganised industries,

white collar workers vs. blue collar workers, and technocrats vs. generalist administrators. The view that the utilisation of the administrative cadre for achieving social change and all-round development has not been counter-productive, has been seriously disputed. The efficacy of various kinds of reform movements and legislative measures as well as undue dependence on charismatic models have also been questioned. Whether one could use imported models or should one develop purely indigenous models for the study of Indian society are also questions which have been seriously considered. The hiatus between tribal and caste societies, and rural and urban societies has been emphasised by some scholars. I would like to state here that a concern has also been expressed about slums with which industrial cities are characterised. The very emergence of slums is a clear indication of the failure of cities to absorb migrants. Moreover, impoverishment of the villages and the lack of employment facilities are mainly responsible for the relentless cityward migration, which brings in its train complex problems of law and order, sanitation, hygiene, and anomie. In this context, it is suggested that subalterns who are not well integrated into the society and hence do not benefit from the existing social, economic and political order are now demanding a radical change of the existing set up. While it may be correct to say that there is a large number of Indians who do not stand to gain from the existing order, what is not sufficiently realised is that this group of Indians is demanding access to facilities like education, health, assured income, self-respect and status as well as opportunities for self-development, so as to ensure a qualitative improvement in their lifestyle. In this context, there is a clamour for reservations not only on the part of backward castes and communities, scheduled castes and tribes, but also on the part of minorities. The minorities feel threatened due to their lack of participation in the modern occupational system and this may be a consequence of inadequate education.

It was mentioned as to whether imported theoretical models and constructions which were developed in the West, including Russia are applicable, not only to understand Indian social reality but also to change it in the desirable direction. This raises certain questions about legitimate authority, the collusion between traditional and legal rational authorities and the interference of charismatic authorities who support the *status-quo*.

I would now like to ask about the kind of theory that one has in mind when one mentions theory--is it an explicit or an implicit theory?

It can be said that most of the sociologists whose works have been acclaimed as very significant did not necessarily start with a view to provide a neat sociological theory. The authors that I can think of in this context are Karl Marx and Max Weber. Both of them wanted to study the western industrial civilization and as such addressed themselves to different features and dimensions peculiar to that civilization. In that process they arrived at theories of society which have been rightly regarded as of fundamental importance in sociology. I would also like to mention that sociology as a social science discipline developed in the west in response to its peculiar social problems. The utilitarian and individualistic explanations of human behaviour was felt to be inadequate. There was a need to develop a discipline which could provide an analytical framework for the study of social solidarities, integration, and rational as well as moral responses to the challenges faced by industrial and complex societies.

To add to the questions about theory, I raise the issue of the objectives of theory. Very briefly the objectives of theory are: (1) description, (2) analysis, (3) explanation, (4) prediction and control and (5) prescription. There is no denying the fact that theory has both a positivist and a normative content. The factual content or correctness is extremely important, though problematic. Then again concern for theory in social science is also influenced by the nature of theory in the natural sciences. Therefore, one comes across a scientific approach to social science.

By and large, it can be said that a theory is not a mere array of concepts which are interrelated. In fact, theory is more than an array of concepts which are logically interrelated and interdependent. These interrelated and interdependent concepts should be further amenable to logical and even experimental verification, ideally speaking. One must be aware of another problem in this respect, viz., whether a theory is an *ex-post facto* exercise or is it something which evolves simultaneously with observations of the contemporary scene. Similarly, there is another dimension of the problem, viz., whether to emphasize deductive reasoning or inductive inferential exercise. Then again, would one treat theory as being provisional or perennial?

Professor Merton has approvingly quoted Whitehead's comment:

"A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost."

"It is characteristic of a science in its earlier stages ... to be both ambitiously profound in its aims and trivial in its handling of details".

"Everything of importance has been said before by somebody who did not discover it."

"We stand on the shoulders of giants before us."

While accepting that we stand on the shoulders of the earlier scholars and therefore are able to improve upon their insights and formulations, Professor Parsons in his famous book *Structure of Social Action* has in the first sentence raised the question: "Who reads Spencer now?". In the Indian context, it may be fashionable or even modern to disregard what Professor Ghurye has copiously written on a wide range of subjects. The question is whether it has any bearing on sociology in India today. Personally, I am inclined to agree with Merton more in respect of his last quotation rather than the first, because we stand on the shoulders of previous scholars we are able to improve upon their insights and formulations. For the present purpose, it is extremely necessary and useful to understand Professor Ghurye's struggle with the discipline since it has an important bearing on the study of sociology even today. Therefore, I would like to spend some time in discussing the manner in which the discipline of sociology was perceived and developed by Professor Ghurye.

Professor Ghurye and the Development of Sociology in India

I am specially writing about Professor Ghurye, not only to pay a tribute to him which he very richly deserves, but more so to highlight the problems inherent in the development of sociology in India. Professor Ghurye's first work, *Caste and Race in India* which was published in the very prestigious Cambridge History of Civilization Series, edited by Ogden, stresses the importance of adopting a comparative perspective rather than treating caste as an entirely unique institution, specific to India. In this work he clearly stresses the inadvisability of accepting caste labels and conforming to the categorisation and segregation involved in the system. In fact, he was delighted when the national government abolished the question on caste in the census questionnaire. With his deep knowledge of Sanskrit, Professor Ghurye was very much inclined to the study of Indian society in general and of the Hindu society in particular, from the perspective of culture and civilization. He was familiar both with historical material and with the contemporary scene, although he was more at ease studying the historical development of Indian society. For him, certain dichotomies such as synchronic vs. diachronic, dynamic vs. static did not exist. In developing sociology as a discipline, he traced the cultural

roots of Indian society to its historical past and emphasised the role of culture and ideas pertaining to the civilization. Of course, in respect to the study of civilization, particularly of the growth and development of cities, he tended to emphasize the physical organisation and facilities rather than their social organisation. In a way, one can say that Professor Ghurye used ideal types pertaining to various social mechanisms in India without either acknowledging the notion of 'Ideal Type' or bothering to define it. As mentioned earlier, he tried to by-pass various dichotomies used by both Indian and Western scholars to describe and analyse Indian social reality. Professor Ghurye's work on *sadhus* is a classic example of his concern for social organisation of the monastic order, although in theory the sadhu or sanyasi is not a part of society. Here again, Professor Ghurye studied the secular and moral dimensions of this peculiar Indian institution instead of being overly concerned with their goal of salvation. While his first work was confined to 'caste and race', he later diversified his interests to include social dimensions such as class and occupation so as to be more conversant with the dynamics of caste rather than its static aspect.

Professor Ghurye was greatly influenced by liberal philosophy and rationality; at the same time, he was imbued with the spirit of nationalism and had a good deal of pride in Hinduism. He was concerned a great deal about democracy, social justice and nation building though he never used these words. He was interested in the process of intergration of new values and structures with the existing social order to evolve a cohesive Indian society. Most of his works provide detailed historical descriptions so as to place the contemporary situation in a proper perspective. It should be mentioned here that practically all his work was atheoretical although he was very well acquainted with the existing theories. In his work, tradition was enshrined and the folk urban continuum rather than dichotomy was highlighted. His emphasis on tradition is particularly reflected in his books: *Vedic India, Gods and Men, Two Brahmanical Institutions* and *Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture*.

I think most of my colleagues who had the opportunity to listen to his lectures or to work with him as research students, would testify that by and large Professor Ghurye confined himself to the use of the structural functional method, although he never consciously acknowledged it or used it. While his study focussed on the historical specificity of India he was at the same time concerned with the quest for universal propositions. He was concerned with the emergence of civilizations and their decline, which he viewed from a comparative perspective.

He was concerned with the physical and technological aspects of civilisation, and with ideas and values to the relative neglect of the role of institutions. In his works, one can see that he tried to enter into a dialogue with Toynbee, Spengler, Mathew Arnold and Bertrand Russell. Emphasis on comparative method and integration can be said to be the major characteristics of his works. At the same time, he was not naive about the possibilities of integration, let alone uniformity, because in his book on social tensions he is fully conscious of the hurdles in the path of achieving integration. In this book he is not only aware of the clash of cultures but also of the contest for power and domination resulting in the conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

Professor Ghurye's atheoretical approach can be explained thus:

- (1) His conspectus was so wide that he tended to treat current reality more in historical terms and preferred to give a very detailed description of the historical development rather than offer a purely sociological explanation.
- (2) There was a reluctance to take risks by adopting any particular theoretical framework which may be explained by the state of the art then. As mentioned earlier even though he did not use any theoretical framework, he was aware of the various theories.
- (3) Because of his intellectual tradition viz., his training in Sanskrit, his nationalistic pride as well as his pride in Hinduism, he was not inclined to accept any framework which was not developed in India. There was an ambivalence in his mind in respect of the domain of sociology. Because of his pride in Hinduism he entered into polemical discussions, dialogues and confrontations with Verrier Elwin regarding the Hindu origins of aborigines. He asserted that the aborigines had strayed away from the mainstream of Hinduism due to the influence of Christianity. I would like to mention in this context that Professor Irawati Karve's approach when she describes the process of 'progressive primitivisation' is more or less akin to the position held by Professor Ghurye. It can be said that concepts, theories and methodology were muffled in his works. He was exploring all the time rather than providing a definitive theoretical statement about social reality, which may be partly due to his aversion to economics and politics as disciplines. His aversion to economics may be ascribed to his strained relations with Professor Vakil. Of course, it must be stated in all fairness to Professor Ghurye that he allowed others to toy with different perspectives. A.R. Desai used the Marxist framework to study Indian nationalism

and he encouraged me to inquire into the relationship between income and social status using a great deal of economic history.

Professor Ghurye's works thus exemplified the struggle of the discipline in its evolution in the Indian context. Professor Ghurye got his research students to work on the changing aspects of various Hindu social institutions such as marriage, family, caste, kinship, urbanisation, and migration thereby avoiding the usual dichotomies with which sociological literature is ridden. Truly, Professor Ghurye, by his own wide range of interests, and by the encouragement he gave to his research students, who enquired into an even wider range of problems and themes in sociology, positively set in motion scholarly inquiries on the complex Indian society although in doing so he adopted no particular framework. Thus, quite a few of Professor Ghurye's hundred flowers did indeed bloom!

Travel and Travail through Sociology

I was fortunate to receive some training in economics while studying sociology at the M.A. level which equipped me in my quest for constructing universal propositions and at the same time made me painfully aware of the need for institutional analysis. While I was particularly impressed by advanced economic theory, I also felt the necessity for re-examining such theory in the context of the institutional set up in which the economic laws were supposed to unfold themselves. That is how I began to search for non-economic aspects of economic behaviour. I have already mentioned that Professor Ghurye and other teachers of sociology were not interested in establishing linkages between sociology and economics or to study the political structures prevailing in society. Hence, I had to flounder on my own in my quest for understanding the inter-relationships between economic and sociological factors when I started working for my Ph.D., under Professor Ghurye's guidance. He not only allowed me to work on the problem but even encouraged me in my work. I must confess that certain ideas were dormant within me for some time which later emerged to take some shape. While studying for my B.A. economics, I had written an essay on 'socialism' for the college magazine wherein I had tried to emphasize the importance of equality of opportunity rather than equality which was the watchword of communism. To write the essay I had to do some reading on comparative ideologies and systems of thought as reflected in socialism, communism and fabianism. For my Ph.D. work it was decided that I should make a

comparative study of three types of social systems viz., (1) a traditional society brought into the sphere of western influence by the political and economic situation prevailing in India then i.e., particularly after the British rule, (2) British society which was supposed to be a paradise of *laissez faire* capitalism where efforts were being made to bring about some kind of equation between social status and income, and (3) the Soviet Union which had tried to establish socialism though not communism by emphasizing equality of opportunity rather than equality. Of course, as one knows, even equality of opportunity, as professed then was a myth which has been borne out by Khrushchov's admission in the late sixties that the soviet society had not succeeded even in providing equality of opportunity to various strata of society. He was frank enough to mention that recruitment to higher positions in the soviet society was elitistic.

My Ph.D. work encouraged me to look for macro reality without losing sight of micro reality in terms of a given social system. A given system became a unit of understanding and analysis and only by resorting to comparative study of different systems on a typological basis, could one expand one's understanding of complex phenomena. Even without being aware of the macro-micro dichotomy or the historical-ahistorical dichotomy, I was also in a way able to bypass some of these dichotomies, thanks to Professor Ghurye! Then again due to the historical study of the development of the three social systems mentioned above, even the dichotomy between historical and ahistorical was bypassed, though not necessarily out of a conscious decision.

Unlike Professor Ghurye I started looking out for more or less theoretical and universal propositions rather than be engulfed in a very detailed and minute description of both historical and current reality. My work for Ph.D. was entirely based on library material but I was fortunate enough to be associated with the field study of 'Group Tensions in Bombay' which exposed me to certain new techniques and made me aware of the importance of field study, though in an urban situation. Of course, Hindu refugees then were spread out in smaller towns beyond Bombay or were put up in certain rehabilitation camps in certain suburbs of Bombay. When I joined Poona University later, I had to gradually prepare myself mentally to undertake field work in villages and towns as well as in cities. Initially my work was confined to survey research, but later on, almost unconsciously I started interviewing people in depth and particularly the leaders of society in respect of thought, norms and action to get a view of the matrix of the unit under

study. I must confess that even in Poona, there was an 'atheoretical' tradition of social research and gradually I had to teach myself to introduce a few concepts in the studies that I had undertaken. I would particularly like to mention the utilisation of Merton's paradigm of functional analysis in my study "Communication of Modern Ideas and Knowledge in Indian Villages". While undertaking a typological study of villages in Maharashtra in collaboration with Professor Irawati Karve, I tried to understand the problems some of the dichotomies presented in sociological literature such as: simple vs. complex society, little vs. great tradition, macro vs. micro approach, rural vs. urban, and synchronic vs. dichronic. In this quest for understanding, I looked at the institutional arrangements which enabled me to understand to a certain extent, the futility of such dichotomies. Even the smallest village was linked with the wider society through the market, kinship, money and the forces of exploitation from without and within. In the study mentioned above, we wanted to understand the connectedness of intergroup relations which were involuntary or compulsory; whether they were in the domain of rituals or in the economic domain covering relationships between landlord and the tiller, money lender and the borrower, employer and the employee and the like. While this study brought to our notice that the village was definitely connected with the outer world, it also highlighted the coercive aspect of the village system in which people were compelled to participate in economic, social, ritual, religious and the political systems. However, one could also see that certain individuals and groups were asking for their liberty, because they were not required to participate in the village economic system, which though eulogized by Wisers and others, was in the last analysis anomic. Similarly, the study of the impact of industrialization in a village near Poona brought to my notice the interplay between the rural and the urban and the way power structure in the village was influenced by external forces.

I was later called upon to work as a Social Scientist Consultant to W.H.O., and had the opportunity of studying institutionalised change in the field of health education, and medical services, which brought to my attention the resilience, not to say the stubbornness, of the traditional structure in monopolising and restricting such services to certain privileged groups thereby frustrating the efforts of the personnel engaged in the distribution of such services to every one in the village irrespective of caste and status. This opened my eyes to the complexities involved in introducing significant changes in villages.

In a later study of bureaucracy and agricultural development, I was again exposed to the limitations of the role of administrators in bringing about change and development in the desired direction due to the interference of vested interests of all kinds. Here again I toyed with some theoretical concepts and formulations, in this case of Weber's theory of bureaucracy, which had been a subject of perennial interest for me. Enquiry into the social structure of intellectuals brought out what Merton calls the serendepity pattern. My contact with the works of Professor Parsons, which was further enhanced by my personal contact, encouraged me to look for more general propositions and to hazard certain propositions about Indian society in theoretical terms which is reflected in my efforts to analyse reference group behaviour in India in all its complexities. I must mention here that my theoretical proposition was vindicated by an empirical study conducted by my former student and colleague Dr. K.C. Alexander. This emboldened me and my students to go in for system analysis which has been reflected in Dr. Sekhar's work on social change in India during the planning period. Professor Oommen significantly brought out the collusion between the forces of tradition and charisma in his study on Bhoodan and Gramdan. Dr. Isaac John pointed out the limits of rationality in the utilisation of bureaucracy for community development.

Thanks to the University of Chicago, which gave me a grant to work on 'Hari Katha', a traditional agency of communication and social education, I was able to unravel the linkage between the traditional and the modern secular and to emphasise the importance of traditional legitimacy to a given medium of communication and social education. Here I was able to utilise the theory of communication as propounded by Katz and Lazarsfeld in their famous book *Personal Influence*. A study of *Social Science Press in India* also helped me to suggest an amendment to the two step flow theory of communication when communication is amongst equals. One of my students Dr. Sekhavat, made a very significant study of the use of television for providing supportive education which threw up the conclusion that social structure plays a very significant role in either promoting or restricting the use of T.V. for supportive education. Therefore, the two aspects of communication theory have not only been tested by me but by my students and colleagues as well. The study of the emergence of regionalism in Bombay conducted by Dr. Sudha Gogate highlighted the importance of content analysis of newspapers to understand the complex problem both contemporaneously and in its historical depth.

Apart from the methodological innovations suggested in the study, the theory of communication was also simultaneously studied. The sub-regional differential development within a given region also posed various problems for regional cohesiveness, which has been studied by my student Dr. R.B. Kolhe, who has carefully enquired into the socio-cultural and political correlates of economic backwardness, utilising the theory of development. My own study of college youth enabled me to toy with certain psychological concepts and theories like competence, identity formation alongwith social structure as characterised by family, kin, caste, education, economic situation, and the rural-urban locale. The process of socialization, paradoxically enough promotes the process of individuation. Here also by making a study of students and their parents who were living in far-flung cities, towns and villages in the different states of India, I was able to by-pass the traditional dichotomy of macro-micro and enhance my thirst for searching for more or less universal propositions on Indian society. Certain other studies like the one on unrest caused by the refusal to change the name of a university, also brought to bear the futility of hasty reforms and actions without adequate preparation for the so-called struggle and confrontation. Here also the importance of reference group behaviour and the process of co-optation is emphasized. I believe I had mentioned earlier that even in villages, the traditional cohesive forces based on economic inter-dependence of the caste system were under pressure from the forces of competition giving rise to conflict.

A study of a factory enquiring into the problem of motivation and alienation brings forth the need for combining psychology, communication studies and of course Marx's views on alienation. It was found that a one way process of communication is counter-productive and sometimes due to the pressure of unions, if there is a direct communication between labour and the top-brass of industries then also it creates problems for the middle level management. Apart from monetary incentives, there are also incentives of status which have to be borne in mind. A job in an industry is more or less looked upon as 'property', which can be bequeathed to one's sons and nephews. Therefore, industrialisation operates in a socio-structural framework. Enquiry into protective discrimination with special reference to education brings out the hiatus between the deprived and disprivileged and those who are already well entrenched in the field of higher education. The use of legislation for ensuring upward mobility through access to higher education is problematic. In my study on college

youth in Pune, I found that some of the students belonging to the deprived and the disprivileged groups who in spite of getting special concessions, lacked the confidence to enter professions and opted for government jobs. While legislation is a very radical measure, it has to be supplemented by a process of co-optation to ensure educational and social mobility. This process, however, is not without competition and conflict.

The study of intellectuals which was mentioned earlier as well as of scientists both in industry and in the academia points out the positional nature of both the intellectuals and the scientists. Hierarchy and bureaucracy entailed in the working of scientific organisations has been observed to be counter-productive. The elite status accorded to scientists particularly in industry is not enough because they keep on comparing themselves with the topmost persons in the profession and as such develop a certain measure of dissatisfaction. Moreover, a scientific worker does not necessarily acquire an overall scientific attitude and the general apathy on the part of so-called scientists towards problems of the wider society reiterates the point made earlier that scientists and intellectuals are mainly positional. I am also tempted to characterise such positional elites as ascriptive though initially they were recruited to the elite group on the basis of their achievement. A study of the process of science and as to how it really reaches the common man is extremely important because it tests communication theory and the way in which change can be directed and institutionalised. It also means concerted efforts by scientists to utilise the resources in the field to promote science through effective demonstration to make it acceptable to the common man. The science movement also has deep-seated implications for transformation and therefore it is studied from the following diverse perspectives: (a) communication theory, (b) directing social change and transforming society through promoting a scientific attitude which would make the people question existing arrangements and challenge vested interests. Of course, this kind of science movement is naturally supported by political consciousness, ideology and mobilization. In short, it is necessary to provide support through action, if change is to be brought about in the desired direction through the application of science. It is found that the consequences of science have to be demonstrated with the use of appropriate technology. I am deliberately using the word 'appropriate' because I stress on the availability of a technology which develops the capacity of the common man to use it meaningfully and independently for day-to-day purposes.

From the statement above, it may be fairly obvious that in order to study the various dimensions of Indian social reality, it is necessary to study several aspects like bureaucracy, communication, directed as well as institutionalised change, changing nature of institutions, use of legislation for bringing about change, vested interests and opposition between the vested interests and the forces of change, stratification of all kinds based on caste, class, ethnicity, sex and the like. It is absolutely essential to resort to structural functional analysis in order to find out the existing structure and how it functions or it does not function, so that ways and means can be suggested to alter it. The concept of dysfunction is very meaningful in this context. By structure, I mean the following things: (a) normative structure, which may be traced to the power structure and domination of certain groups, (b) desire to substitute the existing normative structure by its radical transformation through appropriate action (c) the process of co-optation adopted by the existing structure to contain any possibility of dissent (d) capacity of the structure to contain dissent resulting in confrontation and conflict and (e) the forces of competition so as to make the structure efficient and effective keeping in mind that competition is not equal but more monopolistic, which gives the impetus to over-throw such a system. To put it briefly, in the study of Indian society and particularly in the quest for change and development for the common man there is a need to utilise various concepts and theories at different levels ranging from the structural functional to the conflict model according to the necessity of the circumstance.

In India, it has always been noted that dialectical process is muffled through the process of concessions, exceptions and co-optation, so that conflict is avoided in the bud although even now the process of conflict is very much under way. My struggle with sociology and its utilisation for the study of Indian social reality has to be taken in its symbolic form and not in its personalised form, because I am sure that many of you would have been confronted with a similar set of problems.

It is also fashionable to raise the question of social relevance of research. I would only say that the relevance of research depends on professional competence and on the awareness of social reality which is certainly necessary for choosing the problem for the study. It is very difficult to assert that the findings of any study can be very directly utilised for (a) policy formulation or (b) for suggesting measures for action, although the difficulties and limitations both in respect of policies and actions can be adequately pointed out if there is a will on

the part of those who frame such policies and programmes of action to do so; otherwise the cry for social relevance becomes only a slogan, which to my mind is based on false consciousness and some kind of a guilt complex, not to say populist fervor.

I want to end by emphasizing the necessity of greater co-operation and meaningful dialogue with economists, political scientists, historians, social psychologists and statisticians to make the study of any discipline more meaningful and rigorous.

NOTE:

1. Presidential address delivered to the XVII All India Sociological Conference, held at Surat in 1984.
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