

Empowering Rural Women for Environmental Governance: The Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Rajouri District

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Abstract

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a significant step toward realizing the true essence of independence and empowerment. While women's involvement in politics and local administration is not a new phenomenon, what sets the post-73rd Amendment era apart is the constitutional provision for their universal and reserved representation in PRIs. This move extends beyond the earlier token representation of one or two government-nominated women. The term 'empowerment' is referred to as a system of increasing spiritual, political, social and economic strength of individuals and communities. The empowerment of women has become prime issue of national and international aspects. Women empowerment means a process of creating an environment where women can think and grow independently and be treated equally in socio-economic and political field. Active political participation is a significant and influential matters of empowering women through which women can enter into the core of governmental system and take part in the decision-making process. Emphasis has been placed on the political empowerment of women from the international, national and regional levels. The issue of women's political participation is now receiving central concern of the legislatures of different nations and the international organizations. Various schemes, plans and laws have been made for bringing women in the mainstream of the society and erasing related discriminations and oppression against women. Women's participation in local self-governance is widely regarded as a means to enhance their political empowerment at the grassroots level. However, experience suggests a different reality, as the persistence of patriarchy and male dominance within political parties and institutions often limits their actual influence. Despite being elected to positions of power, women's participation frequently remains symbolic. In many cases, elected women are controlled by their political party leaders or husbands, with some even being recognized by their husbands' names rather than their own. Overall, women's roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) often remain nominal, serving as proxies for their husbands or other dominant groups. To meet the objectives, a research study was designed to generate data on the subject using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches seek to observe, gather, and analyze data for exploration. The research employs both historical and comparative methodologies to provide a holistic approach. An empirical investigation using an interview schedule will augment the theoretical understanding. This research is empirical and relies on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were gathered via fieldwork. The Secondary data were sourced from official documents, specifically through the official web portals of the Ministry of Rural Development Government of India, District and Block Development Offices, and village Panchayat Offices. Additionally, pertinent information has been sourced from the Economic Survey of the Government of India, the Statistics from the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, numerous studies and reports conducted by researchers in the domain, Yearly reports from the Department of Rural Development, reports from various rural development organizations, as well as an array of books, articles, journals, government publications,

newspapers, research papers, and other documents pertinent to the research topic. Respondents must be chosen by using a multi-stage random sampling methodology. Multi-stage sampling methodology should be employed to ascertain the target population. Using a multi-stage sampling method, the researcher selected 87 elected women representatives from Rajouri district. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with the participants using a structured interview schedule. The findings of this study include lack of information, lack of active engagement, lack of knowledge about power, male intervention is a key obstacle that prevents women from functionally effectively operating inside PRIs.

Key Words: Panchayati Raj, Empowerment, Women Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Environmental Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for 30% reservations for women in electoral bodies has surged over the past decade, resulting in a notable rise in women legislators across various countries. Advocates for quotas anticipated that this increase would lead to changes in government policies, priorities, and women's influence in decision-making. However, such a power shift is influenced by party and electoral systems, factors often overlooked. Proportional representation (PR) with a fixed party list system can increase the number of women elected, but those selected are typically party loyalists, limiting their policy impact. In contrast, countries using a single-member constituency system require legal reforms to implement reservations. Women leaders from civil society organizations are more likely to succeed in single-constituency elections, thereby having a greater influence on policy. Despite progress, women still face numerous challenges in male-dominated political chambers (Tinker, 2004). Despite Constitutional guarantees for equal representation for both genders, only a limited number of women have secured a place in the decisions that are made inside the legislative process. This article aims to examine the political empowerment of women in the Indian Legislature, specifically regarding their participation in the process of making choices and highlighting their insufficient representation in ministerial roles. Political participation is a crucial road to women's empowerment and involvement in the choice generating mechanism (Rehman, Dhiman, & Cheema, 2024; Rehman, Dhiman, Nguyen, et al., 2024). The political status of women refers to the extent of equality and freedom they experience in sharing political power and the value society places on their role in the political system. Equality and active political participation are inherently interconnected. Women's involvement in politics is essential for their empowerment and goes beyond merely exercising the right to vote. It includes power-sharing, joint decision-making, and collaborative policy-making at all levels of governance. Achieving gender equality in the political sphere is crucial for a nation's overall progress and development (Ravi and Raj, 2007). Women around the world continue to face a multitude of socio-economic and political challenges. They remain largely excluded from the political sphere due to various factors, including discriminatory laws, practices, societal attitudes, and gender stereotypes. Limited access to education, inadequate healthcare services, and the disproportionate impact of poverty further contribute to their marginalization (United Nations, 2011). Governments all throughout the world have recently concentrated on enhancing socioeconomic circumstances by giving local organizations more authority (Ivanyna & Shah, 2012). Women cannot be empowered unless their social and economic standing is raised. Establishing specific economic and social approaches that prioritize women's whole development and help them see their potential as powerful citizens is the only way to make this happen. For a significant percentage of the population, globalization, liberalization, and other social and economic variables have provided some reprieve. Nonetheless, empowering women in India is still missing in a number of sectors (Shettar, 2015). The influence of literacy and academic achievement on women's empowerment and offers recommendations for bettering the adjustments that must be taken into account for economic growth and women's emancipation (Khatri, 2016). They noted that improving their financial, social, and political standing of women—who have historically been marginalized in society—is the fundamental process of empowering women. It involves protecting kids from all types of violence (Suresh & Sivakumar, 2017). While women's

empowerment is not a necessity for our nation, it is essential for its long-term growth. For our safe future, let's begin empowering women now. It is necessary to alter Indians' perceptions about women. The man ought to believe that equity and equality are becoming more prevalent in the world. Therefore, empowering women will benefit the next generation (Panda, 2017). Women empowerment in India, a knowledge-based society, focuses on enhancing women's abilities and developing their skills to gain knowledge and insight. Women play a crucial role in societal growth, national development, and nation-building. In recent years, women empowerment has become a significant and widely debated topic in India, as development remains incomplete without the active participation and full involvement of women (Akula et al., 2024, Rehman, Dhiman, Cheema, et al., 2024). Empowering women is essential to inspire and motivate them to overcome challenges, whether societal, religious, psychological, or economic, and to advocate for their rights to lead better lives. True empowerment must encompass social, psychological, financial, and economic dimensions (Kumari, 2020).

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE

Empowerment is the process of strengthening individuals' or groups' ability to make decisions and achieve desired objectives (World Bank, 2005). Empowerment is a transformative process that involves internal growth, strengthening of individual capabilities, and the ability to take action. It also includes collective efforts by women (and men) to challenge and reshape the structures of gender-based subordination, which are often linked to power dynamics and control (Mayoux, 2006). The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, enacted in 1992, mandated a 33% reservation for women in the Panchayat system. This marked a significant shift in local self-governance, which had traditionally been dominated by men. The 73rd Amendment required that a minimum of one-third of the seats in Panchayats be reserved for women through elections, replacing the previous practice of appointing one or two women either through government nomination or selection by the predominantly male-dominated leadership of these local governing bodies. Government policies aimed at women primarily focused on promoting literacy, while political and economic empowerment remained unaddressed at the time. In 1958, the government established a National Committee on Women's Education to recommend measures for reducing the gender gap in literacy. Regarding women's participation in Panchayats, a decision was made in 1957 to co-opt two women per block Panchayat, out of approximately 20 representatives, to work specifically with women and children. (Buch, 2000). The study examined the factors influencing women's interest in politics and found that female representatives with higher education and belonging to upper or dominant castes were more engaged in political affairs. It also highlighted that women representative who frequently interacted and discussed issues with their peers exhibited a greater interest in politics (Hust, 2004 and Dahlerup, 2005). The Panchayati Raj system functions as a three-tier structure under Article 243-B of the Indian Constitution, consisting of the village (Gram) at the base, the block (Janpad) as the intermediate level, and the district (Zila) at the top. Additionally, Article 243-C mandates that all members of these bodies be directly elected by the people every five years, with elections conducted as per Article 243-E. Furthermore, the amendments required the reservation of at least one-third of the seats and chairperson positions for women (Article 243-D). The Panchayats were also granted increased fiscal flexibility and autonomy (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Local self-government through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas is designed to empower elected representatives in governance. Panchayats are responsible for managing local infrastructure and ensuring the well-being of village residents. They allocate funds for development projects, oversee their implementation, and play a crucial role in areas such as health, education, governance, and women's empowerment (Duflo and Chattopadhyay, 2004). One of the most significant measures for women's empowerment and increased participation in decision-making was the enactment of the Indian Constitution's 73rd Amendment in 1992. This amendment granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and reserved 33% of seats in Panchayats for women. This bold initiative led to the election of approximately one million women as representatives in rural councils. To promote women's economic empowerment, the government introduced the Self-Help Group (SHG)

movement and micro-financing initiatives. Initially, SHGs were designed to provide credit and alleviate poverty, thereby enabling women to become financially independent. However, both programs primarily focused either on political representation in local governance or on economic activities through SHGs, without incorporating a strong educational foundation to support skill development. As existing literature suggests, the absence of an educational component limited the overall impact of these initiatives (Bhalla, 2011). Domestic violence against women, wage inequality, sexual harassment and abuse, discrimination in nutritional access, and low female literacy rates remain widespread issues in India (Nilekani, 2010). Case studies from 12 states on local governance suggest that India is undergoing a significant transformation. Over the next decade, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women are expected to advance further in social status, leadership, economic standing, education, and political awareness. This progress will empower them to rightfully claim a share in the power structure. Local governance serves as a foundational platform, nurturing future leaders. With elections held every five years, a continuous process of political evolution and leadership development has begun (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009). A crucial element of decentralization is the empowerment of women. Recognizing this, many countries have actively implemented policies to promote women's empowerment across economic, social, and political domains. In alignment with this objective, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have identified gender equality as a fundamental development goal. This aligns with existing academic and policy research, which highlights that women's empowerment positively influences economic growth, reduces output losses, and helps alleviate poverty (IMF, 2013; 2018). Possibly as an indication of progress, the representation of women in national parliaments rose to 25% in 2020, compared to just 11% in 1995 (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2021). Study examines the impact of reserved seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) on their participation and leadership in rural governance. It analyzes the socio-political changes brought by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated women's reservations in PRIs. Focusing on Rajasthan, the research highlights how women leaders have played key roles in education, sanitation, and healthcare, improving rural infrastructure and governance transparency (Geeta and Mishra, 2022). This research aims to explore how decentralization and reservation policies impact women's rise to leadership roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The authors examine data from various sources to highlight the challenges and successes of women's participation in local government. Focusing on the effects of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment's reservation policies, the study looks at women's involvement in governance, particularly in underrepresented groups. Despite significant progress, many women leaders still face obstacles such as social norms, limited decision-making power, and male family members assuming proxy roles. The study demonstrates how empowered women have improved community life by addressing issues like healthcare, education, and sanitation. It also stresses the importance of capacity-building programs to strengthen women's leadership skills, ensuring they can fully utilize their governance roles. The authors conclude by recommending legislative reforms to increase women's representation and autonomy within PRIs, promoting equality and sustainable development (Saxena, 2023). Using real-world examples from rural India, the authors show how women leaders in PRIs have effectively addressed key challenges like education, healthcare, sanitation, and economic development. The study emphasizes the significant influence of women in rural communities traditionally dominated by patriarchy, and highlights the empowering role of PRIs in encouraging women's involvement in local decision-making. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandates one-third of seats in PRIs for women, has substantially increased female representation in these bodies. Through case studies, the research illustrates how women's participation in decentralized governance benefits both their communities and their personal lives. The paper concludes that empowering women through PRIs enhances local governance and challenges traditional gender norms, fostering broader societal change. It calls for increased structural support to help women leaders realize their full potential. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners dedicated to gender equality and rural development in India (Chowdhury & Bhatnagar, 2024).

Objectives of Research

The present research focuses on the following objectives:

1. To analyze the socio-economic background of the respondents.
2. To identify the causes and obstacles in the participation of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions at various levels.
3. To know about the role of their families and the society at large in strengthening the process of their participation.
4. To know the role and functions of women representatives as office bearers in PRIs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives, a research study was designed to collect data on the topic using both quantitative and qualitative methods. These approaches aim to observe, gather, and analyze data for exploration. The study utilizes both historical and comparative methodologies to offer a comprehensive approach. An empirical investigation, supported by an interview schedule, will enhance the theoretical understanding. Respondents will be selected using a multi-stage random sampling method to identify the target population. The sample size was 87. Multistage sampling involves selecting samples through multiple levels or stages, starting with larger units (e.g., districts or tehsils) and narrowing down to smaller units (e.g., villages or households). The multi-stage sampling has been done in the following stages:

Step 1 Division of the population (Stage 1) Selection of One district namely Rajouri from 20 districts (10 of the Jammu region and 10 of the Kashmir region).

Step 2. Selection of Tehsils (Stage 2) Selection of Four Tehsils (Koteranka, Rajouri, Sunderbani and Thannamandi) from Rajouri District. Out of the total tehsils, a simple random sampling method can be used to select a subset of tehsils. For instance, select 4 tehsils randomly:

Step 3 Selection of blocks within each Tehsil (Stage 3) Each selected tehsil contains two blocks. Selection of four Blocks (Plangarh, Siot, Dhangri, and Budhal New) from Four Tehsils randomly.

Step 4 Panchayat/ village Selection (stage 4)

Panchayat/village should be selected one after another. Fifty percent of the population was taken from these villages. For the study, 87 elected women representatives were selected and interviewed separately. Their awareness levels before entering grassroots democracy and after their entry have been analyzed thoroughly. These 87 elected women were elected to the Panchayats.

District	Tehsil Selected	Block Selected	Sample Collected (BDCs)	Panchayat or village selected	Sample Collected (Sarpanches, Panches)
				Badakhana	3
				Bathian	3
				Dodasan Remote	3

Rajouri	Thannamandi	Plangarh	1	Khablan B	3
				Lah	3
				Nerojal	2
				Saaj 1	3
				Saim samith	2
	Sunderbani	Siot		Bakhar	3
				Chamm A	2
				Dharamsal	3
				Marcholla	3
				Siot Lower	3
				Thanda Pani	3
	Rajouri	Dhangri	1	Androlla	3
				Badhoon A	3
				Baljarallan	2
				Dalhuri Salyote	3
				Dhangri Lower	2
				Kalakass A	3
				Ladote	4
				Sagota	3
				Saranoo Bridge	4
	Koteranka	Budhal New	1	Dandote	4
				Kewal Lower	3
				Phalni	2
				Rajnagar Upper	4
				Shahpur	2
				Targain Upper	3
			3		84
Total			3 samples + 84 samples		87 samples

Table-3.8 Shows sample size of the elected women

S.No	Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
1	21-30	17	19.5
2	31-40	25	28.7
3	41-50	35	40.2
4	51-60	5	5.7
5	61 and above	5	5.7
	Total	87	100.00

Table No. 1 Respondents Age

While conducting our research work in Rajouri District about the Role and developmental activities of women in Panchayati Raj Institution of Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir we first of all tried to know the age group of our respondents. However, after collecting and analyzing the data we concluded that 17 respondents fell in the age group of 21-30, and after this age group came those respondents who fell in between the age group of 31-40 and such respondents were 25 in number. Similarly, 35 respondents fall in age the group of 41-50, and 5 respondents fall in the age group of 51-60. Lastly, respondents falling 61 and above age group were 5 in number.

S. No	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	General	30	66.7
2	Schedule Tribe	45	30.5
3	Schedule Caste	0	0
4	Other Backward Classes	7	0
5	RBA	5	2.8
	Total	87	100.00

Table No. 2 Respondents Category

Now, the respondents were asked about their category, i.e. whether they belonged to the General category, Schedule Caste, Scheduled tribe, or O.B.C category, and it was discovered that the majority of the women were from the Schedule Tribe, with 45 respondents out of a total of 87 selected. However, 30 respondents were found to be from the General category group, 5 were found to be from RBA and 7 was from the OBC category.

S.No	Marital Status		Frequency	Percentage
1	Married		60	68.9
2	Unmarried		25	28.7
3	Widow		1	1.14
4	Divorcee		1	1.14
	Total		87	100.00

Table No.3 Respondents Marital Status

According to the findings of the aforementioned study, 68.9 percent of respondents were married, while 28.7 percent were unmarried. Marital status influences an individual's emotional security and insecurity to some extent. Those that are happily married are usually tension-free, relaxed, hardworking, and ambitious to provide a better life for their wife and children. Those who are unhappy in their marriage tend to be irritable, fault-finding, and do not put their heart and soul into their employment.

They become emotionally unstable, prefer to brood, and are anxious. Unmarried people, in general, and young ladies in particular, find it difficult to sublimate their desire for the other sex. For a suitable husband, as long as their bloom and youth do not fade. Marriage, in general, is the ultimate method to have a happy existence and discover the true meaning of life.

S.No	Family Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Unemployed	20	22.9
2	Labourer	10	11.49
3	Agriculturer	50	57.47
4	Buisness	0	0
5	Politician	2	2.29
6	Social Worker	5	5.74
	Total	87	100.00

Table No. 4 Respondents Family Occupation

From the above study it was found that the dominant number of the respondents were reaming engaged in the agricultural occupation and their number is 50 whereas 20 respondents were unemployed in the district Rajouri. However, 10 respondent out of 87 were laborer, 2 out of 87 were politician, and the remaining 5 were social worker. Hence the above study proves that majority of the people are dependent on agricultural sources.

S.No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	YES	72	82.75
2	NO	15	17.24
		87	100.00

Table: No. 5 Are you aware about constitutional and legal provisions on PRI

The contemporary period is characterized by modernity and competition. People from all over the world have shrieked and are aware of the day-to-day happenings as a result of the advent of mass media, and nothing remains hidden. However, when we go through the awareness regarding educational and legal regulations on Panchayati Raj Institutions in the modern world, we find that even though our data assisted us in masking the above truth, and 72 respondents were well aware of the constitutional and legal provisions on Panchayati Raj Institution, the remaining 15 respondents were oblivious of the constitutional and legal provisions on Panchayati Raj Institution.

S.No	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1	YES	85	97.7
2	NO	2	2.29
		87	100.00

Table: No. 6 Do you agree that women's political participation can be increased by providing good education to them

97% of all respondents said that giving decent education can boost women's political participation. PRIs and administrative assistance from government officials would go a long way toward encouraging women to participate in the panchayat. 2 respondents stated that they do not believe this. In summary, the preceding study shows that education is critical to the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

FINDINGS

Organize Advocacy Campaigns: NGOs should arrange seminars, workshops, and campaigns to advocate for women's rights. These initiatives can raise awareness and mobilize support for women in politics.

Improve Education for Elected Women: Many elected women have limited education, often only up to primary levels. Providing educational opportunities for these women can enhance their effectiveness in governance.

Encourage Decision-Making Independence: Although women participate in politics, they often rely on men for decision-making. It is essential to promote independent decision-making among women.

Personal Insights on Local Dynamics: As a researcher with knowledge of Rajouri, I find it vital to analyze the local political landscape. My understanding of the area's geographical, economic, social, and political aspects informs my perspective on improving women's participation.

Address Societal Biases: The biased attitudes of society toward women present a significant hurdle in their participation in PRIs. Changing these perceptions is critical for advancing women's empowerment in local governance.

Address Socio-Cultural Barriers: Promote gender sensitization campaigns to change societal attitudes toward women in leadership roles. Engage with community leaders, families, and local influencers to build support for women's participation. Address issues of harassment and discrimination to create a safe and empowering environment.

Leverage Technology: Use mobile apps and online platforms to train and update women representatives about governance processes. Facilitate virtual meetings and discussions to overcome geographic and logistic barriers.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Set up systems to monitor the performance and participation of women representatives regularly. Identify challenges faced by women and create feedback loops for continuous improvement in policies and practices. These measures, collectively, can empower women and ensure their effective participation in the Panchayati Raj system, driving grassroots development.

CONCLUSION

The notion or investigation of the empowerment of women is not novel. Gender issues have been occasionally discussed and brought to the forefront. Nevertheless, the ultimate resolution to the plight of women has not been achieved. At present, this half of the global population is grappling with discrimination, domination, exploitation, marginalization, and harassment. It is not that their socio-political status has remained unchanged; rather, they are still denied the rights that are truly theirs as human beings. The position of females in India has been evolving. They are provided with substantial legal protection by constitutional provisions that guarantee equal opportunities and dignity. They have also demonstrated an astonishing increase in their involvement in various aspects of life over the past two years. Several laws have also been enacted to strengthen women in the areas of social, economic, legal, and political spheres. Nevertheless, this concept of empowerment has been exclusively debated in terms of "power to" rather than "power within" up until this point. Consequently, the provisions that were established to empower women were incorporated into the institutional programs and provisions. They have never been in favour of acknowledging, promoting, and incorporating them into decision-making platforms. The government has implemented numerous plans to fortify the Panchayati system, which serves as the backbone of the country in terms of population and economy, in recognition of the significance of rural India. PRIs were granted constitutional status through the 73rd Amendment. This act also guaranteed women's active involvement by providing them with a reservation. Through this provision, administrative sincerity toward women's empowerment is most effectively demonstrated.

Significantly, the percentage of vacancies reserved for women in the Panchayats has now risen to approximately 33%. The strength of women representatives in the central and state assemblies was increased as a result of this endeavour, which also had a positive impact on local governance. The concept and belief in the potential and possibility of women's emancipation through political involvement have been significantly enhanced by these changes. Rural women are confronted with an even more daunting circumstance than their urban counterparts. They are subjected to a greater extent to a variety of inequalities and discriminatory practices. However, they are perceived as being indifferent and unaware of these atrocities and discriminatory practices. Additionally, they are deprived of the fundamental rights of remunerations, landholding, and making decisions at both the familial and social levels. Consequently, it is imperative to educate them regarding their circumstances and entitlements and to subsequently implement institutional measures to promote their advancement. Panchayats have been in existence for an extended period as the bodies of the people. Nevertheless, women were not a fundamental component of the system until the reservation provision was implemented. This led to an institutional transformation by increasing the strength of women in decision-making roles from 2 to 4 percent to approximately 33-40 percent (8-10 lakh). Because so many women are now running for political office., the investigation of their social and economic profiles, political interests, aspirations, awareness, and experiences over more than a decade, as well as the factors that influence their involvement in the political arena, has emerged as an intriguing area of research. At the local level, the Panchayats in India is a distinctive decentralized administrative system. The people's political consciousness, education, and participation are facilitated by these institutions. They serve as a critical mechanism for their engagement and growth. Consequently, PRIs provide the necessary substance for the democratic system to operate in the public interest. Although the Indian democracy has been in existence for over fifty years, the common Indian woman continues to fantasize about political empowerment. In terms of both equality and progress, women's participation in the political process is very crucial. The 33 percent quota for women in panchayat institutions has made a significant first step even if a similar clause for women in Lok Sabha and state assembly is still waiting. Women who have been elected as delegates in the PRIs have had both encouraging and depressing experience. One million women first entered the public domain and are expected to bring about significant changes in a society firmly anchored in legacy. For the minority that has been ruled for ages, their level of involvement in the panchayat bodies was not especially remarkable, hence their behaviour might be illogical. Most elected women have no idea about the consequences of holding political office. They simply comply with the directives of their male counterparts (father, sibling, father-in-law, and spouse). Illiterate women are unable to make decisions and are primarily influenced by the dominating and cunning male members who operate behind the scenes. It is crucial to consider the representation of females in the milieu of redressing gender-specific issues.

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