



Tamil Takes Centre Stage: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Television

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the role of language in mediated modernities in India through an analysis of *Sirappu Pattimandram* (Special Debate), a Tamil-language debate show on the politically-affiliated corporate Sun TV network in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. The show provides an opportunity for the articulation of anxieties over how social and economic changes affect the private lives of Tamil speakers. These anxieties are contained through the use of Tamil-language oratory which recasts quotidian everyday problems in an ancient literary idiom that provides reassurance through imagined continuity with a glorious past.

Key words: modernities, India, television, oratory, Tamil, invented traditions

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Introduction

In the closing remarks of the Independence Day 2017 episode of Tamil TV show *Sirappu Pattimandram* (Special Debate), the moderator Professor Solomon Pappiah says,

“Puram kettru ponai, akamum kettru pokum. Arasiyal maattrankal, poruladhara maattrankal evai ellam serndhu samūhathai maattri irukirathu. Enakkullum prachanai, en naatukullum prachanai.”

(“When my outer world is ruined, so is my inner world. Political and economic shifts have changed society. I am facing difficulties, my state is facing difficulties.”)

While this is a sentiment that may be universal, it is presented in the *Sirappu Pattimandram* show in uniquely Tamil terms, using the ancient literary tropes of *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior), presenting a performance of Tamilness for the audiences and building a community with other Tamil speakers.

Sirappu Pattimandram (Special Debate) is a mainstay of festive holiday programming on Sun TV, the leading Tamil-language television channel in India. At a time when fast-paced news and fiction dominate film and television screens, the *pattimandram* is a studio-based talking heads format, devoid of the glittering visual spectacle that many other shows offer. Despite the availability of newer types of shows, *Sirappu Pattimandram* enjoys continued popularity. The *pattimandram* is uniquely a Tamil-language phenomenon, using formal and literary language and relying on literary tropes from over two thousand years ago.

In this paper I present an empirical case of *Sirappu Pattimandram* to uncover the particularities of a mediated modernity that is embedded in this specific linguistic location, to better understand the relationship between language and mediated modernities or ‘telemmodernities’ as defined by Lewis et al. (2016). According to them, ‘telemmodernities’ are spaces where commercial and regulatory logics come together, alongside identities that focus on consumption as well as civic activism, and foreground issues related to cultural identities, socioeconomic divides and a longing for the good old days in a changing world.

Language plays a key role in the political, economic and cultural life of Indians, perhaps to a greater extent than in many other places because India exhibits a great linguistic diversity. The Indian Constitution recognises 22 official languages, which taken together are spoken by approximately 96% of the Indian population, and the last census in 2011 counted a total of 121 languages (including the 22 official languages)¹. The undeniable pressures exerted by linguistic forces on the political and economic lives of Indians can be seen in the fact that within a few

decades of Indian independence in 1947, India was reorganised into states on the basis of language. Language and identity are closely intertwined in India (as in many other places), with languages and the states in which they are spoken revealing complex and varied historical trajectories.

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 is widely recognised as the event that triggered a remarkable growth in the Indian language media, in terms of both volume and variety of output (Athique 2009; Kumar 2014; Mehta 2015). The rise of television channels in several Indian languages is considered to have ushered in “an era of polyphony” paralleled perhaps only by the advent of sound in motion pictures in the 1930s, which was considered to be the impetus for the growth of film production in multiple Indian languages (Athique 2009: 163). In recent years, media production in regional Indian languages or “regionalisation” has come to be viewed as a useful framework for theorising media audiences and industries (Kumar 2014: 22). Neyazi (2010), for instance, through his examination of Hindi language newspapers, argues that technological innovation and a sensitivity to local cultural values has led to the creation of hybrid content and a vernacular modernity. The “regionalisation” of Indian media thus offers a rich variety of unexplored avenues for researchers interested in modernities and their media representations in specific local contexts.

I begin by providing the historic context for linguistic community building in 20th century Tamil Nadu and the role played by Tamil oratory, followed by a brief background of television programming in the Tamil language and the development of the *pattimandram* as a television show. I then present some arguments about the modernity presented in *Sirappu Pattimandram* and the conclusions that they lead us to.

The Tamil language and the Dravidian identity

Tamil is the official language of the Tamil Nadu state, geographically located on the south east coast of the Indian peninsula. It is the native language of a population of approximately 69 million people (according to the last decennial census conducted in 2011). Tamil is also the oldest among the Dravidian languages with a literary tradition and has a known history dating back to approximately 100 B.C., although commentators mythologise a much longer history stretching back hundreds of centuries “with much of it lost in the great flood of time” (Ramanujan 1985: xiv). In 2004, Tamil was declared to be a ‘classical language’ by the Government of India because it had a recorded history longer than a thousand years with an original literary tradition

Although the state of Tamil Nadu officially came into being in 1969, its birth was preceded by the development from the 1940s onwards of a language-based

Tamil identity and consciousness, often known as a “Dravidianist political paradigm” (Bate 2013). Tamil-language speakers of diverse political affiliations were united from the 1930s onwards in their opposition to the growing importance of the Hindi language during the freedom struggle against British colonial rule. According to Ramaswamy (1997):

Dravidianism’s driving imperative was a vision of the Tamil community as an autonomous racial and political entity (inam), even nation (nātu), whose sacral center is occupied solely by Tamil, from which all its members claim shared descent. (Ramaswamy 1997: Language of the Nation: Dravidianizing Tamil, para. 3)

The Tamil language was used to bring its speakers together as a unified voice within the Indian nation. Tamil oratory played a crucial role in this politically-driven identity formation project, through the use of a literary style of speaking that emphasised the historic importance of the language itself which symbolised “an ancient and original Tamil-speaking civilization, independent of what was considered the relatively more recent Sanskrit-speaking, Indi-Aryan, North Indian, and Brahmin-dominated civilization” (Bate 2013: xv).

Oratory and Tamil modernity

Bate (2013) observes that prior to the 1940s, political orators used a colloquial form of Tamil (also referred to as ‘nadaimurai’ (ordinary), ‘kodun’ (bent), or ‘kochai’ (vulgar) Tamil); after the 1940s, a more literary form of Tamil, referred to as ‘centamil’ (fine) Tamil, began to be used in oratory. Bate argues that through the use of this literary form, the ‘centamil’ form of the Tamil language in their oratory, Tamil politicians emphasised the ancientness of the language and the great civilisation it represented, and that this transition to an older form of speech was an important part of a modern imaginary in which Tamil-language speakers were forging a new identity as “a people” (Bate 2013: xv). The centrality of the use of a particular form of the language in this identity project offers an illustration of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) describe as an invented tradition:

...a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (9)

I argue that this use of literary Tamil resurfaced on television and achieved prominence in another, more recent time of transition, when liberalisation in the 1990s triggered sweeping economic and social changes that affected the daily lives of most Indians (including Tamil-speakers) when it played a role in cementing together community ties among Tamil speakers not just in India but in the Tamil-speaking diaspora across the world and provided a reassuring continuity with the past. To better understand the use of language in the rapidly growing medium of television, the next section presents some developments in Tamil-language television.

Tamil-language satellite television programming

The earliest satellite Tamil television channels, including Jaya TV and its rival Sun TV, were launched in 1993 (Athique 2009). These television channels are affiliated with the leading political parties in Tamil Nadu, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Jaya TV is named for a former Chief Minister, the late J Jayalalitha, and is owned by her AIADMK associates. Sun TV is owned by family members of another former Chief Minister, the late M Karunanidhi of the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party, which is the older of the two parties. Moorti (2004) underlines the effect that this ownership and its commitment to the Dravidian ideology has on the programming of these channels when she observes that: “The insistence on a pure Tamil draws attention to the Dravidian politics that are the underpinning ideologies of the channel owners and their political affiliations.” (557)

The main Tamil-language television channels then, because of their ownership and close relationship with political parties, are a part of tradition that emphasises the use of the Tamil language to create an imagined Tamil community where audiences consume mediated performances of ‘Tamilness’. This mediated Tamilness has been known on occasion to embrace diversity of caste and religion (see Harindranath 2013) and has “facilitated the articulation simultaneously of a cosmopolitan and a vernacular sensibility, and thereby permitted the inscription of a particular regional identity” (Moorti 2004: 551). Sun TV and Jaya TV are only two of the many Tamil-language television channels in existence today. Tamil Nadu’s strong economy supports the second largest gross state domestic product in the country² and it is home to flourishing film, television, print and online media industries.

Sun TV's *Sirappu Pattimandram* (Special Debate)

The *pattimandram* (debate) show format is popular and most Tamil television channels have their version of it, some even overlapping with the telecast of each other, generally on holidays to celebrate Hindu festivals or national holidays such as Independence Day or Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. This home-grown format features two teams of about three speakers each and a moderator (called a *naduvavar*). The speakers from each team alternately present their views, rebutting the views of those from the opposite team who have spoken before them, and finally the moderator presents a judgement (*theerpu*). The show is taped in the presence of a studio audience in a large auditorium and the topics are of general interest, although some specialised debates do take place.

Pattimandrams, especially in their televised form, are almost synonymous with Professor Solomon Pappaiah, an eighty-two-year-old former professor of the Tamil Department at the American College, Madurai. Professor Pappaiah is the best-known moderator of the television *pattimandram* and has been a moderator for over four decades. He moderates *Sirappu Pattimandram* (Special Debate) on Sun TV. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed Professor Pappaiah at his home in Madurai. He notes that while the *pattimandram* enjoyed a long history in religious and scholarly circles as a deliberative exercise aimed at reaching "the truth", it became an oratorical performance when it moved out of these rarefied environs onto the urban street corner where migrant rural labourers celebrated their annual religious festivals and welcomed cultural performances that would engage their communities. While the earlier form would have had religious or academic premises for deliberation, the *pattimandram* form underwent a change in its focus. The statements to be deliberated now were the social issues of the day, especially centred around the family. This made it popular at a time when the Dravidianist political paradigm placed value on literary Tamil oratorical performances and ensured its longevity and eventual transition to television in its present form (interview Solomon Pappaiah).

The show presents a multiplicity of views which are eventually weighed and 'judged' in the court of public opinion. This not only makes these opposing views easily accessible, but also offers us the opportunity to observe the value placed on each view by the producers and to identify those views that enjoy the corporate and political support of the channel owners, advertisers and audiences. This unique format has not been replicated in other Indian languages, and therefore represents an opportunity to examine a specifically "Tamil" response to media production and consumption, embedded in Tamil linguistic traditions thereby embodying a Tamil modernity.

For the study I also interviewed Bharathy Bhaskar, the leading female speaker on the show and Vice-President at Citibank, Chennai. A representative of

Sun TV at the Sun TV headquarters in Chennai was also interviewed. I examined 12 consecutive episodes of the show over a two-year period beginning with the *Deepavali* episode in November 2015 and ending with the *Deepavali* episode in October 2017. Between five and seven episodes are telecast each year³.

Sirappu Pattimandram on Sun TV is aimed at an older audience. Speakers are rarely below the age of 45 years, and most are in their fifties or sixties. The moderator also refers to this when he says, “Most of us here who are over the age of 50” in the *Ayudha Poojai* 2017 episode. The generational divide is further emphasised when he narrates an anecdote about Socrates describing the last days of democracy, that they will occur when a father fears his son and a teacher fears his pupil.

The speakers are for the most part professors (as evidenced by their titles such as *perasiriyar*, *munnaivar*, *pulavar*) like Tha Ku Subbramanian or *Pulavar* Ma Ramalingam. Most speakers are Hindus with the exception of the moderator who is a Christian. Some speakers have been performing on the show for many years. Young talents who gain popularity as speakers in other forums such as college speaking contests or older speakers from academic and literary backgrounds are occasionally introduced and continue on the show if they are popular with audiences. Team formation is based on the topic, so speakers who were on opposite teams in one episode might well be on the same team in another, except for the final speakers in each team. The most popular speakers get to go last, so that they have an opportunity to rebut all the speakers of the other team who have gone before them. For the last few years, audiences have enjoyed the pitched battles between the final speakers in each team, Bharathy Bhaskar and S Raja, whose views on most issues are presented as being diametrically opposite. Bharathy Bhaskar, often the only female speaker on the show, observes that her on-screen rivalry with the final male speaker, S Raja, appeals to viewers because they represent two seemingly opposing viewpoints, with Bhaskar’s arguments appealing to more liberal viewers while Raja’s arguments are representative of viewers who may be more conservative (interview Bharathy Bhaskar). Their interplay in many ways reveals the Tamil linguistic community’s conflict over the anxieties over the changes that globalisation has wrought in the lives of its members and their aspirations to benefit from it.

Traditional, formal and restrained

The debates on *Sirappu Pattimandrams* are marked by formality and cordiality, unlike the ‘debates’ that are presented on English-language television news shows which feature loud and aggressive screaming matches. The costuming shows a self-conscious restraint to be traditional, so that the focus is on the debate itself. The male speakers are traditionally dressed in shirts and spotless white *veshtis*

(traditional male attire consisting of off-white fabric draped over the lower half of the body from the waist downwards). Very occasionally a male speaker may wear trousers instead of the *veshti*. If they are female, they are dressed in silk *saris* but are not heavily made up or bejewelled, quite unlike the characters in soap operas on the same channels who wear conspicuous jewellery that forms a part of the soap opera's spectacular visual trope. Prof Pappaiah insists on this dress code because he says that the *pattimandram* is for all viewers, including those who may be economically underprivileged (interview Solomon Pappaiah).

The show begins with classical instrumental music (featuring the traditional *nadaswaram* and *mrudangam* instruments) similar to what one would hear at a Hindu temple or wedding, playing over show opening graphics that feature popular visual symbols of the festival being celebrated (so the *Deepavali* episode features an earthen lamp design, the *Pongal* episode features a clay pot and sugarcane, and so on). So while modern computer graphics are used, they are used to depict traditional visual elements and are accompanied by traditional music.

The moderator introduces the speakers and formally invites them to speak. Each speaker rises and goes to the lectern and speaks in the high fine *centamil* with quotations from Tamil poetry, literature and mythology along with references to current events and specific news items as well as other anecdotes and pop culture references. Veiled and sometimes not so veiled references are made to the trials of the political party which is currently in power. At the time that this study was conducted, the AIADMK party (which is the main political rival of the DMK party with which Sun TV is affiliated) led the state government in Tamil Nadu. We hear light-hearted comments and interjections from the moderator. Speakers who are awaiting their turn or have completed their turn are seated and follow along or make notes. We see them smile when they are gently ribbed by the speaker at the lectern or by the moderator. The conversation, whether it is light-hearted and humorous, or whether it is forceful and passionate, remains civil throughout. The moderator winds up and sets off a large timer at the end of the allotted few minutes and sometimes speakers may take a minute or two longer to complete their piece. Each piece always begins and ends with formal greetings, sometimes specifically addressed to Tamil speakers (*En arumai Tamizhare*).

The moderator always has the final word. Sometimes the 'judgment' is a tie and he accepts the importance of both sides' arguments as in the case of the debate on *Women's Safety: Stronger Laws or Attitude Change* when he concluded that "*Ondru ondrukku pagai allai*" (one is not the enemy of the other). On other occasions, as at the debate on *In the present time: Increased selfishness or selflessness*, he concluded that, "The forests of selfishness had overtaken the small sprouts of selflessness." This seemingly nuanced position taken by the moderator, which generally leans towards a conservative position, is not unique to this format and

has been observed in television shows with other formats and in other languages where more liberal views are aired but contained through the voice of the anchor or host. (See for instance McMillin 2003.)

A deliberative space

Through its self-consciously formal structure, *Sirappu Pattimandram* showcases the deliberative process, where arguments are presented and heard out without interruptions. While the topics of the debates on this show do not directly address burning political, economic and social issues of the day such as deprivation, caste discrimination and religious violence, the performance of the deliberative process cannot be undervalued in a democracy where riots and violence are endemic.

The importance placed on deliberative, “talk-centric rather than vote-centric” approaches to democracy has risen in recent times both with political theorists and in the practice of democratic institutions (Elstub and McLaverty 2014). Deliberation is widely accepted to have historically existed in India, and to have taken place in a variety of fora including religious and scholarly gatherings (Sen 2005). In the last few decades village level deliberative gatherings or *gram sabhas* have received constitutional sanction and in some cases have proved to be effective in ensuring better governance (Parthasarathi and Rao 2017). Even when deliberation is aimed at opinion formation rather than decision making, as it does with ‘weak publics’, it has been observed to be of value (Fraser 1990).

For instance, the show offers a space, albeit patriarchal, for the expression of women’s views. While the show features female speakers, they are seldom equal in numbers to male speakers and the moderator has always been a male. They give voice to the enormous burden that women, especially working women, carry in families. The only occasion when an entire team consisted of female speakers was on the occasion of the Independence Day 2016 episode on women’s safety. Overtly patriarchal statements are regularly made on the show, such as one male speaker who referred fondly to a time when women did housework without gadgets and when not having a refrigerator meant that every meal was freshly cooked. He also expressed pity for working women who eat with an eye on the clock rather than caring about the taste of what they are eating. While some of these arguments use stereotypical tropes of women as martyrs to the cause of their families, the show offers a space where primarily unspoken cultural codes are stated and questioned with great enthusiasm.

While Bhaskar is a strong speaker, she rarely gets to be the last speaker who has the opportunity to rebut all other speakers. She is placed regularly as the penultimate speaker whose arguments can be mocked by the final male speaker. The summing up and ‘judgement’ is also always presented by the oldest male on the

show, the moderator. Despite all these caveats, this is a rare space where a few women speakers are able to speak uninterrupted due to the formal timed structure of the show, and when the opposing team argues, the arguments do not take the form of personal attacks, as they do in online fora. In this sense, the *pattimandram* is a modern space, offering civil, democratic deliberation and debate and attempting to give women a voice, however limited that might be. It does this, however, through its self-conscious use of a literary style of language that dates back many centuries.

Tamil-language oratory as reassurance and quotidian problems recast in the literary idiom

Quotidian anxieties are recast in the literary idiom through the debates on the *Sirappu Pattimandram* show as anxieties of the *akam* and the *puram*. These are terms familiar to Tamil speakers and arise from Tamil poetry of the *Cankam* age (100 BC to 250 AD) to denote interior/private worlds and exterior/public worlds, thus love poems are *akam* poetry while war poems are *puram* poetry (Ramanujan, 1985).

The social changes that took place in the wake of economic deregulation have been documented to have generated enormous anxieties in Indian media audiences (see Mehta 2015; Mazzarella 2003). As Mehta observes,

The transition to the new order was incomplete and the deep regulatory crisis that continues to plague the post-reform landscape has had serious consequences for the state of the industry, the nature of content it produces and ultimately for the public sphere and health of democracy. (Mehta 2015)

Mehta makes this point in the context of broadcast legislation in India, but his argument is just as valid for the broader changes and anxieties generated in the wake of liberalisation and globalisation. Mazzarella (2003) also highlights the types of panics that arose at that time when he observes that, "...the mid- to late 1990s was a time of heightened anxiety about the meaning and value of 'Indianness' vis-a-vis a global field" (34). Television shows picked up these anxieties and addressed them after a fashion, one of which was through a reassuring reflection on heritage (Rajagopal 1996).⁴

In this regard, the *pattimandram* with its Tamil-language oratorical performances that invoke the rich literary heritage of the Tamil language offers reassurance through its very use of the literary style of the language and the continuity that it offers with the past. The Tamil language itself is symbolic of the greater

Tamil imaginary that is summoned through its use.

Whether the topics are *The Main Reason for Today's Problems: Changes in the Home or Changes in Society* or *The Main Challenge for Today's Parents: Their Children's Education or Marriage*, where the statements made by speakers show that individual responses to the government's decisions such as the imposition of new taxes or the uncertainties due to changes in rules regarding college admissions to professional medical education programmes give cause for anxiety to families, they are discussed using literary tropes such as *akam* and *puram*. Even when the discussion turns to seemingly mundane issues such as what is to be done in the case of mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue, these tropes are used: "What am I to do if despite all my best efforts in my home (which belongs to 'akam', i.e., the interior world), mosquitoes from the street (which belongs to the 'puram', i.e., the exterior world) swarm into my home because of the lack of an adequate response from the authorities?" asks the moderator in one episode. Through its reliance on literary Tamil, *Sirappu Pattimandram* creates a continuity with the past and recasts modern day problems as problems perennial to Tamil speakers down the ages and creating a reassurance that changes have been a part of Tamil lives for centuries and, like their ancestors, they too will prevail over the challenges they face.

Conclusions

We find spaces in Indian regional language television that have been created by global flows of capital and sustained by the overlap of political and corporate power to contextualise viewers' anxieties and shape public opinion.

The *Sirappu Pattimandram* show offers its primarily older audience members a space for the articulation and containment of their anxieties over the sweeping economic – and in their wake, social – changes that have taken place in the last three decades. It does this through the creation of a mediated space that is traditional, formal and restrained. While this is a gendered space where the humour is sexist on occasion, it is a space that contains anxieties through the use of Tamil-language oratory and recasts quotidian problems in a literary idiom that offers continuity with a glorious past. The use of literary tropes such as *akam* (private)/*puram* (exterior world) provides a reassuring context to anxieties at a time of great economic and therefore social inequality when viewers might find that while GDP growth rates are being touted, rising inflation makes balancing the family budget harder.

As a show on a commercial television channel owned by the close affiliates of a powerful political party, it helps maintain the status quo by emphasising that all is not well in the *puram* and therefore *akam* difficulties are only to be expected.

While women are given the space to speak up, patriarchal sentiments are expressed often, and more often than not a male speaker has the last word. So while a cordially deliberative space is created, it is also a space where conservatism has the final word.

The deliberative atmosphere of *Sirappu Pattimandram* is also rare, democratic and progressive since it presents a space for reasoned debate, a space for eloquence and well thought-out opinions. Speakers marshal facts and figures as they make their case. While the speeches may be impassioned, the atmosphere remains formal and speakers, both male and female, are able to express views that disagree with their opponents' views. Male speakers appear to be consumed by nostalgia for a patriarchal past, while the female speakers aspire for the opposite. *Centamil* takes the centre stage, addressing Tamil-speaking viewers around the world at a time when their lives are changing due to urbanisation and other effects of globalisation, reminding them of a glorious TAMILIAN past and reassuring them that they too will prevail.

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Notes

¹<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language-2011/General%20Note.pdf>

²According to statistics released by the Central Statistical Organisation, Government of India, New Delhi, available at <http://www.esopb.gov.in/Static/PDF/GSDP/Statewise-Data/StateWiseData.pdf>

³Generally the first episode of the year is on 14th January to celebrate the harvest festival of Pongal, then on 14th April to celebrate Tamil New Year's Day Varsha Pirappu, followed by an episode on 15th August for Independence Day and finally an episode each for Vinayagar Chaturthi (the festival dedicated to Lord Ganesh) and Deepavali (the festival of lights). The last two festivals are celebrated according to the Hindu calendar so their dates vary each year. The former occurs in August/September and the latter in October/November. In some years, episodes have been telecast on a few additional dates such as Oct 2nd (the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi) or on Ayudha Poojai

(the festival of weapons and instruments) which occurs in October/November. (These episodes were available on youtube.com at the time of the study, although it is not rare for them to be taken down due to copyright violations by the posters.) The show only airs on national holidays such as Independence Day or Gandhi Jayanti and on Hindu festival days such as the ones named above, and not festivals of other religions.

⁴ Indian heritage, as Arvind Rajagopal points out, was "...that of a lost utopia" (Rajagopal 1996: 459), especially at a time of transition in Indian society, and was perceived by Indian audiences as a way to cope with rapid and deep-rooted changes. While Rajagopal was referring to the success of the televised version of the epic Ramayana that was telecast on the Indian national broadcaster, Doordarshan, in 1987–1989, a few years before the start of liberalization, we will not be remiss in considering the reassurance offered by a return to tradition.

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