

CHAPTER-III

WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERS IN INDIA

Any assessment of **women's** participation in Indian politics and leadership roles requires a study of their roles during freedom movement and their part in political processes and organisation. These roles, as is well known, are **influenced** by religion, customs, patriarchy and other factors. In **this** context some assessment are worth mentioning.

Girija Khana and **Mariyamma** A. Vergheese give a picture of social customs and **smrities** that shaped the behaviour of **women** in India and narrate how their freedom was curtailed. **Marcus** B. Fuller in her book 'The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood' **explains** how Hindu religious customs became obstacles to the **emancipation** of women. Malladi **Subbamma**, author of several books in **Telugu**, traces the causes for subjugation of women and stresses that **religion** is the basic factor for the backwardness of Indian women. **Thinking** on similar lines Maria Mies in her 'Indian Women and **patriarchy**, deals with the conflicts and dilemmas of Indian women **students** and working women. Maria Mies mainly deals with women's biographical case studies which reveal the incapable roles **and** conflicting situations in the changing society.

Vijay Agnew in her book 'Elite Women in Indian Politics', Neera Desai in 'Women in Modern India', Manohar Kour in 'Women in Indian Freedom Struggles', **Veena Majumdar** in 'Symbols of Power' deal with political roles and political participation **of** women in India. Recently certain books have come out on the roles **of** women in Panchayat Raj written by writers like **Manikyamba** **and** **Suseela**

Koushik. In 'Women in Politics', Vibhuti Patel deals with the need for participation of women in decision making process. Suseela Patni in 'Women in Political Elite' examines the implications of role perceptions and role conflicts and Uma sekaran in 'Women Power' stresses on the need for creating gender positive environment. J.K. Chopra in 'Women in the Indian Parliament' wrote about the role played by women in the Parliament.

In the opinion of Veena Majumdar, no serious examination of the emergence of women's questions in India and women's equality as an issue was taken as a study. To her, until women's equality issue is taken as an ideology for nation building, a change is not to be expected. To the question 'Women have fallen behind', why? according to her, the answer is that women are not being accepted in the political deliberations. During the freedom movement thousands of women participated, but the details of women who participated and sacrificed for the nation have become 'nameless and faceless'. Moreover, about the role of women in other popular movements, nothing is brought out. There are popular movements, peasants' movements, workers' movements, in which women participated in considerable numbers and played important roles. The Status Committee report finds that the role performed by women as a pressure group on the political process had become virtually

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nil.

Women In the Freedom Movement:

With regard to participation of women in Freedom Struggle, India had a rich past, unlike western countries.³ During the freedom movement, a few women belonging to the upper strata of the society were brought into the mainstream of politics.⁴ Gandhi's attempt to uplift women had less impact at the grass root level.⁵ Usha and Usha give an estimate of women's participation in the Indian National Congress. After the setting up of Indian National Congress, ten women delegates from educated and progressive families, attended the Congress session in 1889 for the first time. In 1897, many women attended the Congress as delegates. Most of the women who attended the Congress worked as volunteers and very few participated in deliberations. However, there is no denying the fact that their very presence at the Congress session was enough to make a qualitative difference in the nature of organisation. As Sarojini Naidu said, 'when the air is full of the spirit of non-discrimination, I do not see why it is necessary that a woman must speak.'⁷ Even though in large numbers, women's participation was a part of mass national movement, certain roles were performed by them during the Freedom Movement, in the Ashrams, Congress committees, leadership roles in Salt Satyagraha. And their part was not negligible in revolutionary, peasant, workers and such movements which were part of the national Freedom Movement.

Duvvuri Subbamma a dynamic woman from Andhra Pradesh served as a member of All India Congress Committee for 14 years from 1922 onwards.^o Eminent women like Sarojini Naidu, Rukmini

Dasgupta also served as members of All India Congress Committee. But in the Provincial Congress Committees, as Durgabayamma reported, women members were negligible and the result was that women were not selected as candidates to contest for the provincial legislatures. But Kamala Nehru was a member of U.P. Congress

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Committee and participated in key decision making in 1931. Duvvuri Subbamma played a key role in the Kakinada Congress in 1922 and was included as a member of All India Khaddar Board which was meant for propagating the need for production of Khaddar.

Women as Presidents:

Some women occupied the highest positions of the office of the president of All India Congress. Annie Besant became the Congress President in 1917 and Nelli Sengupta in 1933. Annie Besant stated 'the strength of the Home Rule Movement is rendered ten fold greater by the adhesion to it of a larger number of women who bring to it the uncalculating heroism, the endurance, the self sacrifice of the feminine nature. The league's best recruits and recruits are among the women of India.'¹² Annie Besant along with Balgangadhar Tilak started the Home Rule Movement in India. Sarojini Naidu dedicated her life in the service of the mother India. At the memorable session of the Indian National Congress in 1915, she had read a poem and inspired the delegates. She became the Congress President in 1925. Emphasising on the unity of India,

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she gave the shortest and the sweetest presidential address. Sarojini Naidu asserted in her speech, "No sacrifice is too heavy, no suffering is too great, no martyrdom is too terrible that

enables us to redeem our mother from the unspeakable dishonour of our bondage".

Though before independence, 3 women were given the roles as presidents of the Congress, after independence, it was Indira Gandhi, the only woman to occupy that position. Swarna Kumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore and K. Ganguli were the eminent participants during the first decades of 20th century.¹⁵ Since then women of proved eminence could reach the peak. Annie Besant organised the Theosophical Society, worked as a prominent leader of the Home Rule Movement and edited news papers for the purpose of educating the people.¹⁶ She brought new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organisation and a new outlook in the field of Congress. In the same way Sarojini Naidu also brilliantly played a variety of roles. Sarojini Naidu was the key person along with other prominent leaders for the arrangement of peace between the Congress and government in 1931. Consequently, Gandhiji was convinced to lead the Congress for talks.¹⁸

Women in Ashrams:

Most of the prominent women during the Freedom Struggle either spent in the Ashrams or got political training in Ashrams while serving the **Ashramites**. For this purpose, Raj Kumari **Amrit** Kour, Sushila Nayyar and Mira Ben served the Ashramites in a big way as per the observations of Prithvi Singh Azad. Raj Kumari Amrit Kour spent for some time in **Sabarmati** learning from **Gandhiji** and serving the Ashramites. Sushila **Nayar** started her political career

in Snbnm;iti , serving the poor patients as a young doctor. Prithvi Singh Azad wrote 'Mira Ben' continued to serve the cause of the Indians if it were the cause of Bapu himself, sincerity and devotion. By writing her book, 'The Spirit's Pilgrimage, she did to India a great service¹⁹.

Along with Gandhi, Kasturaba Gandhi did notable service, especially by awakening women and propagating **Khadi**. All the women members of Nehru's family actively participated in **the** Civil Disobedience Movement. **Kamala** Nehru displayed a talent for organisations and became a strong willed woman capable of leading people after her.²⁰ **Vijaylakshmi** Pandit and **Rameswari** Nehru were also active in the nationalist movement. **Vijayalakshmi** Pandit also held the role of the president of General Assembly of the U.N.O.²¹

Women and **Revoluti ons**:

Revolutionaries also took part in the Nationalist Movement, by adopting the extreme and violent methods for achieving the goals. **Kalpna** Dutt, inspired by Chittagong Armory, joined the revolutionary organisations at an early age and she worked vigourously in the movement from 1930 to 1933 and got transportation for life. Prithi Latha, a senior revolutionary during freedom movement, led a group of seven in an attack on the European Club at Pahartali in the suburbs of Chittagong on 25th sept, 1931. All other members of the group escaped but Prithi Latha **committed** suicide. In her pocket, she carried a message to **the** women of India. It said, "Women today have taken the firm resolution that

they will not remain in the background... I earnestly hope that our sisters would not nurse the feeling that they are weak. With this hope in my heart, I am proceeding today for **self-immolation**". While expressing her will she wanted to show that women could also sacrifice their lives for the country.²² Such was the dedication of women in the Freedom Movement.

Women's **Participation** in Army Upsurge & Trade Union Movement:

Participation in trade unions and working in **army** upsurge were recognised as part of patriotic activity. Ahilya Rangenkar and **Vimala** Ranadive participated in various strikes during freedom movement. They led the women and organised women towards supporting historic struggles in 1946. When an **Army** Upsurge was going on in 1946, it was women who performed services to the army people and were attacked by the police. 32,000 army personnel in different posts were supported by the organised leadership of **Vimala** Ranadive and Ahilya Rangenkar. According to **Vimala** Ranadive, women's participation was '**very efficient**' during that struggle.²³ **Leela** Sundarayya dedicated her life for the working class and participated in Telengana Peasants' Movement. Subsequently, she worked tirelessly for the Communist Party of India. **Ushatai** Dange, an eminent woman leader of the working class, ~~was~~ fought against the social evils on the one hand and on the other ~~she~~organised the working class women, poverty stricken peasants, and also lower class women. Renu Chakravarthi from Bengal, Parin **Ramesh** Chandra from Punjab, Suseela Gopalan from South India, Moturi **Udayam** from Andhra Pradesh participated for the working class benefits.

Bharathibai Bhore served for the working class and women's development. Suseela Gopalan devoted her life for the cause of women. Moturi Udayam worked through Praja Natya Mandali. Aruna Asaf Ali, a militant Congress leader, joined Congress as **sevika** and dealt with women's issues. She participated in **militant** activities and went to the underground during the Quit India Movement. She hoisted the national flag with extraordinary courage and leadership defying the rules according to the British. Same kind of courage, in a different way, was shown by captain **Lakshmi**, who joined Azad Hind Fouz as a commanding officer of women's regiment. She played the role of a soldier in serving the cause of Indian Freedom Movement.²⁷ The heroic role of women in the revolutionary movements during the **Freedom** Struggle continued to inspire the people even today.²⁸

Women in Women's Movement:

While participating in political **movement**, Indian women tried for their own liberation. As pointed out by Arpana Basu, 'In India, **feminism** and nationalism were closely interlinked'.²⁹ Hence, Indian women's **movement** had a unique nature. Between the **two** world wars, women had to play two roles and a variety of objectives were sought by women from time to time, through their leadership and organisational abilities. At the beginning of the century, women's movement was confined to campaign **and** education for **women**, linked with social reform movement. The role played by Banduru **Atchamamba** was that of a silent campaigner of awakening women. In the path of reforming women, Panditha Rama Bai started Sarada Sadan. Such

roles were taken over by Sarala Ray, Sunitha Devi, Nalini Datta,³¹ and Rameswar' Nehru in Northern India and Kadnukuri Rajyalaxmi, Subhalaxmi Ammal, Sarojini Naidu and Durga Bai Deshmukh in South India.³²

Durga Bai Deshmukh, popularly known as Bayamma, a social reformer and a leader of the nationalist movement, carried on her mission till the last, establishing several service activities for the development of women. Her most important achievements was that she established Andhra Manila Sabha at Madras and Hyderabad for the conduct of these activities. Her dynamism and leadership were recognised by the Congress Party and she was nominated to the Constituent Assembly. Subsequently she served as the member of the Planning Commission and contributed to the development of the nation.³³

Mass women's movement and mass organisation grew among women in various parts of India. The most important among the organisations were the Mahila Atma Raksha Samithi of Bengal, Andhra Mahila SanghaiD and Mahila Sangham of Kerala.³⁴ In the Indian women's movement, the first organisation was 'Women's India Association' formed by Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Margaret Cousins, and Kamala Devi Chotopadhyaya in 1917. These women laid the real foundation for the women's movement in India and tried to promote women's political participation by giving prime importance to women's suffrage and the next objective was to secure nomination in the legislature.³⁵

Another women's organisation was the All India Women's Conference, started in 1927. Its prominent leaders and presidents were Sarojini Naidu and Vijaylaxmi Pandit. Among the secretaries, mention should be made of Hansa Mehta, Kamala Devi Chhotopadhyaya and Peddada Kameswaramma. They developed branches all over India and by the mid 1930s the association claimed a membership of over

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10,000 women. While the women's organisations found it easy to take a firm and consistent stand as patriots, they found it difficult always to accept the priorities and tactics dictated by male dominated political parties. As far as the All India Women's Conference is concerned, there was a rift between women members participating in the freedom struggle and women members, who claimed the association to be apolitical. Among the active women of the association who resigned between 1939-43 were Hilla Rustomji, a Parsi from Hyderabad Muslim educationist, Rahamathunnisa Begum and Yuvarani Saheba of Pithapuram. Begum Hamid Ali, President of the A.I.W.C. in 1940, was critical of the Central Legislative Assembly for passing one sided laws.³⁷ The issues taken up by A.I.W.C. were pardah, legal equality and child marriages. Relentless efforts of Rani Laxmibai Rajwade, Charulatha Mukherjee, and Renuka Bay and many others resulted in the appointment of Narasingh Rau Committee to inquire into women's legal disabilities and to suggest reforms.³⁸

In conclusion, it could be said that women in the women's movement during the Freedom Movement worked for the emancipation of women to root out social evils and also worked as a pressure group on the Assemblies to bring legal reforms towards uplifting the

status of women. The need of bringing a social change through Hindu Code was supported by liberal thinkers like **C.D.Deshmukh**, V.V. Joshi and Hari Singh Gour before and after independence.

After independence the women's movement was passive till 1970s. But from **1975**, women's prominence started slowly increasing either through organising women or taking up women's issues and also through trying to enter legislatures. For instance '**Saheli**', the Institute of Social Studies Trust in New Delhi, Uma in Bangalore, Priya in New Delhi, **I.W.I.D.** in Madras, Stree Atyachar Virodhi Parisada in Nagpur, Sahiyar in Baroda are working for women's local problems from 1970s and also doing participatory research about women's problems. Recently certain women's **movements** have taken the objectives of protecting environment and those movements include '**Chipcho** Movement', '**Sarovar** Bachao Andolan' by **Mamta Benarji** and '**Narmada** Bachao Andolan' by **Medha Patkar**.

During the 60s, specific women's issues did not surface prominently, yet women were mobilised in large numbers in general struggles of the rural poor, tribals, industrial workers and other mass movements. Participation of women in anti-price rise demonstrations, rural revolts in **Dhule** District in Maharashtra and the Anti-Arrack Movement in Andhra Pradesh are some of the struggles. During the International Women's Decade (1975-1985) women's autonomous organisations revitalised their activities. Another step forward was the organisation of women's **conferences**. Towards exchanging the ideas, to discuss general problems of women and to draw possible solutions, certain women's **conferences** have

been organised by women's study centres. Some examples could be noted here. In 1975, **Street Sakti Sangharsh** organised a **conference** of working class women at **Pune**. In February, 1988 a Conference of **Women's Liberation Front** was held. Thereby **Indian Association of Women's Studies** was born. To bring the women academics and women activists and women leaders of political parties on to a common platform, the **Indian Association for Women's Studies** has been playing an important role. Women's associations have been trying to exchange their views even with feminist organisations.³⁹

Women in the Legislatures:

In independent India, women entered the parliament and their participation has been extended to the legislative deliberations also. Women have been active participants in the voting process. In the 1952 **general** elections, **women's** participation was minimal as the percentage of voting was only 37.1. But it had interestingly moved up to 58.17% in 1984, but declined to 47.30 in 1991.

In 1952 women's membership in Lok Sabha was only 4.4 percent, but in 1984, it moved to 7.9 percent. Thus, the increase in the percent of women members is not significant. In 1991, women membership in the Lok Sabha is only **6.6** percent. It declined in 1989 to 5.3 percent. The situation compelled women's organisations to agitate for the 30 percent reservation in the state legislatures and in parliament. This is also due to the reason that support from the political parties is not encouraging.⁴⁰ Not only in the

parliament, even in the central cabinet, very few positions are held by women. In Mrs. Gandhi's cabinet only one woman, other than her, was a cabinet minister during the entire period of her leadership. The absence of women in adequate numbers in the cabinet is a reflection of the strength of women members in the parliament.

In spite of limited membership of women in parliament, they have duly participated in its proceedings. J.K. Chopra's Study makes clear that in the four decades during 1952-1989, women parliamentarians introduced in all about 150 bills. Out of these 110 were introduced in the Lok Sabha and 40 bills in the Rajya Sabha. In the Seventh Lok Sabha, the maximum number of bills introduced by women were 35. And in the Fourth Lok Sabha, women introduced only two bills. It is to be noted that women introduced bills specifically concerning women. General issues were not taken up by them, at the bills' introduction stage.⁴²

The prominent women, who took initiative in introducing the bills in parliament include Raj Kumari Amritha Kour, Suchetra Kripalini, Durga Bai, Deshmukh, Renu Chakravarthi, Indira Gandhi, Parvathi Krishnan, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Tarakeswari Sinha, Suseela Nayyar, Sarojini Mahishi, Nandini Satpathy, Margaret Alva, Geeta Mukherji, Pramila Dandavathy, Sheila Kaul, Nazma Heptulla and Mohishini Kidway. The women who introduced the bills, belong to the upper strata of the society. They had political affiliations of their families or association with the national movement. Most of them were elected to parliament again and again and got much

experience as parliamentarians. During the said period, they represented on 126 parliamentary committees of different nature.

After independence, women joined the realm of politics in large numbers. Even the younger generations started showing keen interest in politics.⁴⁴ During I and II Lok Sabhas, women raised in the Lok Sabha issues mostly connected with the partition of the country. During that period, women who were dynamic and keen participants in discussion were Amritha Kour, Durgabai, Deshmukh, Suchetra Kripalini and Farvathi Krishnan. In the III Lok Sabha, women from South and West Bengal were more active. In the IV Lok Sabha, participation of women was very difficult due to problems of strength of the majority party. In the V Lok Sabha, national emergency had become a setback to women candidates. Again popularity of women legislators gained in the VII Lok Sabha and they have contributed considerably in discussions.⁴⁵

Women were under represented in the Upper House and Key positions were rarely held by them. In each decade, a marginal number of key positions were occupied by women. After a long gap, it is Jayalalitha, who is holding an important position at the state level, i.e. Chief Ministership in Tamil Nadu. Due to her initiative and charismatic leadership, she continues to hold the position. That is why, towards women's development, their voice is to be introduced in the larger decision making process.⁴⁶

Women in State Legislatures:

(Women's representation in the state legislatures in India emerged from 1935 onwards.) By 1940 there were 80 women members in the state and provincial legislatures. Dr. **Muthu Lakshmi** Reddy was identified as the first woman to secure nomination to Madras Legislative Assembly. **Kamala** Devi Chotopadhyaya contested for the Madras Legislature but lost. **Ammanna** Raja was elected as Deputy Speaker in the Madras Legislative Assembly. She held the position with high dignity and proved her capabilities and subsequently got elected to Rajya Sabha after independence. In 1946 **Rukmini Lakshmipathi** became not only a member of the legislature but was also inducted as minister in the **Prakasham** Ministry.

After independence, women like Nandini Satpathy in Orissa; Suseela Gopalan and Gouri in Kerala; Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu; Roda Misthi, Sarojini **Pulla** Reddy, Sada **Laxmi** in Andhra Pradesh; Yasoda Devi, **Kamala** Beniwall, Girija Vyas and Sumitra Singh in Rajasthan emerged as powerful women in their respective legislative assemblies.⁴⁹ They proved their abilities and among them Jayalalitha, Suchitra Kripalini and Nandini Satpathy could handle the highest power and authority of Chief Ministership at the state level.

The above are some of the examples to suggest that eminent women have been present in state legislatures. Women can contest and participate if 30 percent of reservation policy is properly implemented.

Women in Elections:

In India women dominate the election scenario, but disappear after elections. Women generally participate in election adopting certain campaign techniques. In the elections for parliament and state assemblies, women mainly carry on propaganda through door to door campaign. Election rallies are also attended by them. In India, there are some charismatic women leaders. Indira Gandhi and Jaya Lalitha are the best examples in this context. In four **parliamentary** elections and assembly elections since her entry into politics, Indira Gandhi was leading the election campaign. She used to attract the Indian masses in the public meetings. Her charisma and economic programs secured for the Congress 51.3% votes and 441 seats in 1971 elections.

In the general elections of 1967 the Congress party lost elections in nearly half of the states and returned to parliament with a simple majority. To overcome the political situation, she tried to manage the crisis by the slogan '**Garibi Hatao**'.⁵¹ She tried to delink the elections to the parliament **from** those of the state assemblies. In 1971, she had become India's only national personality by calling the first midterm parliamentary elections before the full five years of the Lok Sabha had been completed and 1971 elections were conducted in the name of plebiscite about the single issue of who should be the leader. The state assembly elections in 1972 provided similar opportunities.⁵² It was a success for the crisis management of Indira Gandhi. In 1977, Indira Gandhi had to face the surprise defeat but for her emergency

excesses. She had utilised the media in 1980 and campaign process became centralised. Usually electoral campaign in India have been highly personalised affairs. During the elections, she toured extensively on the road and gained 351 seats to Congress in 1980, securing absolute majority in the parliament. It was considered as a Second Indira Wave, the first taking place in 1971-72 elections. However, in 1971 and 1977, Indira Gandhi fought the elections adopting socialist oriented programme with the objective of 'Garibi Hatao'.⁵³ She converted the elections and the government from 1971 to 1977 as one woman show. All ministers became hench men and came to the sero level of existence.⁵⁴ But the percentage of votes for Congress came down in 1977 due to the failure of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's strategies and the creation of a centralised party structure.

In Tamil Nadu, Jaya Lalitha joined A.I.A.D.M.K.in 1982 and took the charge of election campaign. She was made the propaganda secretary till 1987 and after the death of M.G.R. she became the party chief. A.I.A.D.M.K.- Congress (I) alliance in 1984 proved to be much more effective than D.M.K.-Congress(I) alliance of 1980. This marks the change in the election campaign due to the charismatic leadership of Jaya Lalitha. A.I.A.D.M.K. received 18.8% of total vote and 61% of the seats that it contested. In that election also, Jaya Lalitha did well in the Lok Sabha election campaign and proved her ability and established charismatic leadership. In the 1991 Assembly Elections of Tamil Nadu, Jaya Lalitha came to power with a thumping majority. For her charisma, power and authority, she is called 'Maharagni'.⁵⁵ After she was

recognised by **M.G.R.** in **1982**, she has been leading a key role in the Tamil Nadu politics, despite facing certain problems.

The present well known rising women leader in Andhra Pradesh is no one else than **Lakshmi** Parvathi, wife of T.D.P. **supremo** N.T.R. Starting **from** November 1993, Lakshrai Parvathi attended each T.D.P. Praja Sadassu held at **Rajahmundry**, Nalgonda, Nellore and Praja Garjana in Hyderabad. All these political meetings were aimed at the success of T.D.P. in the **Assembly** Election of 1994.⁵⁷ She attracted huge crowds at a meeting held at Hyderabad in 1994 with Praja Garjana, a unique technique, the aim being `show your strength and win the elections. **Lakshmi** Parvathi addressed these gatherings and participated in the election campaign along with **N.T.R.**, who used to introduce her to the people.⁵⁹ `Lakshmi Parvathi' factor was an **important** attraction during 1994 elections in Andhra Pradesh. Before and after these elections, she has been playing a key role in selecting the party candidates also.⁶⁰ Even the T.D.P. activists have realised that she is all important. Added to this N.T.R. used to praise her saying "I am here because of her". Her prominence found expression in an interview by Lalitha A. Iyer with him during election tour when he said "talk to Lakshmi Parvathi, she will answer all your questions". The above remarks give strength to a rising woman leader in Andhra Pradesh.

It important to note that known and unknown roles are being played by women in India both at the central and at the state levels. Women's **participation**, especially in the election activity

is most intensive. In Bihar they have proved their abilities in the parliamentary elections in the 1991. But it is observed that their political identification and political awareness are not as much present as they were thought to be. Attitudes and skills about politics could be developed through political training.

Women in the election process usually adopt moral and non-violent methods. In the opinion of Indiresan, who says, the important point is not how many elections have been held, but how well they were held. So in the election process women's participation is a healthy sign.

To conclude, women leaders and women with the support of 'political dynasty' have played an important role in the Indian elections and women leaders supporting ideology, charisma and commitment participate in a big way for the success of elections. But how far the elections have empowered these women is a big question. Their services are usually better utilised for the success of elections.

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