



# ASA Newsletter

News & events of the Assamese people living around the world

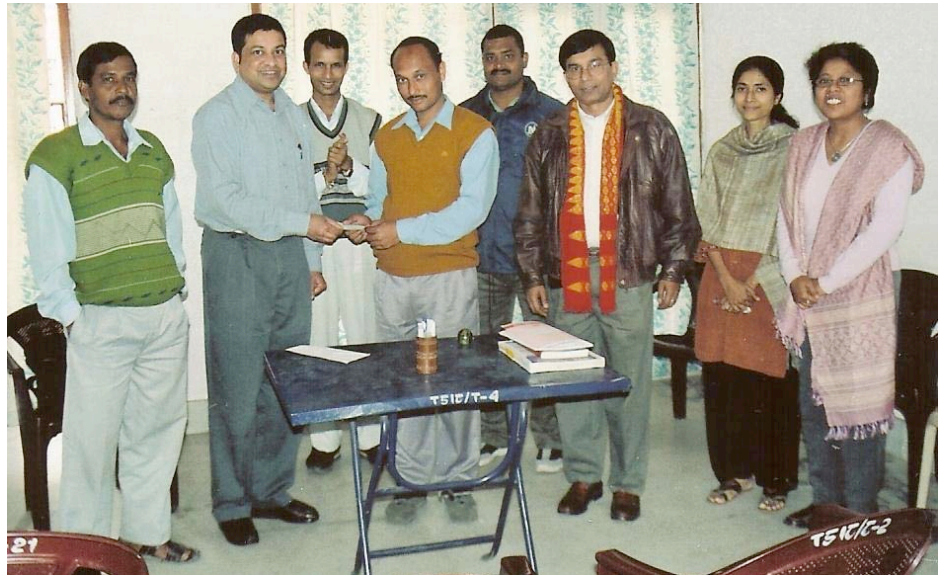
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## A Tale of Two Lakes and Revived Hope

THEY HAVE A DREAM, but it is not unrealistic. They have a plan, but no means to turn it into a project. Over the years, there were scores of meetings held, rolls of pictures taken, and headline news ran the front page of the newspapers on the prospective economic development of these economically backward people of flood-ravaged areas. But very little or practically nothing was done in reality. In every walk of their lives, they have to trip against the debris of broken promises from both government and non-government organizations. Yes, I am taking the readers to Puthimari, a medium size village in Kamrup district, situated on the bank of Puthimari River.

In a nice afternoon of 12th of January, this year, I and Amiya Sharma, Deputy General Manager (Economist) of NEDFi, who is also coordinating ASA's flood relief effort overseas with the help of NGOs, headed out to



the village of Puthimari to assess the area and how the flood relief money could possibly be utilized toward building a self sustained livelihood of the villagers. So we made it a point to stay focused on the investment strategy rather than using up the money for temporary relief in the form of micro donations. As we were driving past villages, the fecundity of nature was apparent everywhere. If the history of America west is written on the saddle of horses, the socio-cultural history of Assam is undoubtedly imprinted on the thatched cottages nestled amidst tall trees and swathes of undulating paddy fields that stretch up to the horizon, as well as the kaleidoscopic pageantry of a day in the life of their inhabitants. All throughout my way, I could hear the wind calling my name; I could feel the warm hugs of the small towns that retain their fabled past with undiminished charm.

Siba Deka and Tapan Pathak, the president and secretary of Pragjyotisha Krishi Shilpa Samabay Samiti Ltd, respectively, along with some other villagers greeted us when we got there. They took us to the shore of a huge oxbow lake. This lake

was created as a result of a change of course of the river Puthimari over a hundred years ago and now encompasses an area of over 25 *bighas*. This lake is already very rich in fish population and has tremendous potential for large-scale fish farming. Unfortunately the lake is swamped with aquatic plants and weeds to the extent that one can literally walk over them from one bank to the other. From the data available from various sources, we estimated cost of cleaning the lake in the vicinity of over three *lakhs* of rupees. We have a limited set of resources and a gargantuan task ahead; but we were undaunted in our spirit to put-together a plan that would make a long lasting difference in the lives of those financially challenged villagers. So we had to consider plan B. There is another lake, not very from the oxbow lake that I just talked about, which is already in fish production. This (latter) lake can be leased from a local socio-cultural body for about 80,000 rupees a year. Reportedly, this lake is so rich in fish population that, even after all the expenses for its maintenance are paid off,

the owners will be able to save over a *lakh* of rupees. This money can then be invested on clearing up the other lake and if things work as per plan, the oxbow lake will be ready for full-fledged fish farming in couple of years providing the villagers with a descent and permanent source of livelihood. So the current plan is to loan the flood relief money to the cooperative society that will buy the lease of this lake for a year.

The beauty of this alternative plan lies in that once this group of villagers is secured with a sustained income, the original pool of money can then be recycled for similar productive projects in other areas. When the dream of these villagers will come to a reality, this project will be a tremendous source of inspirations to the NRI Assamese, who contributed to it and Assam Society of America, which is implementing the project on their behalf - to forage similar projects in future.

Assam Society of America takes this opportunity to extend its sincere thanks to Puran Sharma, Sanjib Bhuyan, Pallav Bordoloi and Jukti Kalita, who earlier organized the Flood Relief Concert in Franklin Park of New Jersey. ASA will also remain grateful to Amiya Sharma who is overseeing the work in Assam on behalf of the society and IIRM, an NGO, which is giving a helping hand with the financial transactions.

(In the photograph: *ASA representative Prakash Deka hands over the flood relief money to Siba Deka, the president of the Samabay Samiti. Also seen in the picture are: other members of the samiti, Tapan Pathak, the secretary (3<sup>rd</sup> from left), Amiya Sharma of NEDFi in "Phulam Gamocha" and Nandini Hazarika (extreme right), a Fulbright scholar and Executive Director, ECO Systems, India.*)

*By Prakash Deka, New Jersey*

## ASA Delivers Project Hope

DURING 2004, ASSAM SOCIETY of America collected money for a charitable project titled "Project Hope". Details of the project were published in a previous issue of the

ASA Newsletter. ASA decided that Project Hope would provide money for the Dining Hall of B.D. Deaf and Dumb School, Kahilipara, Guwahati. The school, theoretically

is supported by the Government of Assam, although not much financial help has come from the Government in recent years. The students in this school are all bright, energetic and driven. But, God has dealt them a rough deal, and in a place like Assam, it becomes a stigma if one is disabled in any physical manner.



## Assam Society of America offers aid to deaf school

By A Staff Reporter  
GUWAHATI, Jan 12  
Assam Society of America (ASA), as a part of its "Project Hope", has donated \$ 10,000 to the B.D. Deaf and Dumb School, Kahilipara, here for carrying out renovation work in its dining hall and hostels and also to purchase necessary utensils and furniture.

ASA representative Prakash Deka, based in New Jersey, is here on a visit recently and has handed over the cheque to Siba Deka, president of the local lacchong Samiti, the local lacchong Samiti, to carry out the renovation and other stuff on their behalf. Indrani Lekharu, secretary of the Samiti and Jukti Kalita, its general secretary, received the cheque, a release said.

Sometimes, even parents and relatives abandon such children. An institution such as the B.D. Deaf and Dumb School is engaged in a noble mission dedicating itself to the education and general upliftment of a segment of society that is almost invisible in public life. This is the first phase of Project Hope. In the

second phase, ASA intends to raise money to work with the Deaf and Dumb School in Barhampur, Nagaon. If you would like to help buying things that can be used in day-to-day life, please contact Sanjib Bhuyan, President of ASA.

*(In the photograph: ASA representative Prakash Deka hands over the check (\$1000.00) to Ms. Indrani Lekharu, the president of Padmini Sangha)*

**By Prakash Deka, New Jersey**

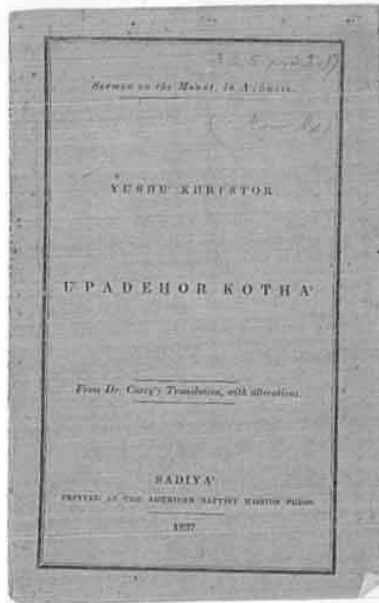
## Search for the Assamese 1837 Bible at the Harvard Library

ON SUNDAY (FEB 7TH, 2005) Priyankoo-da (Sarma), a graduate student of Linguistics at the University of Florida, sent out an email on the AssamNet requesting information about the oldest Assamese Bible, which he needed for his research work. I recollected another discussion, long ago, on the forum, about one of the oldest publications in Assamese language being the Bible. I was sitting inside the Harvard library and decided to check out its availability within the library. Harvard is reputed to possess various rare documents. This was the moment to find something of interest to many Assamese people.

The very first search on the HOLLIS Catalog search revealed 8 bibles in Assamese language. The oldest was the one published in 1837.

I copied the details on the reply-email to Priyankoo-da and AssamNet. Subsequently, Jugal-da (Kalita) suggested the use of the inter-library loan facility and Alpanaji (Sarangpani) also found the book in Library of Congress catalogue, as she mentioned in her email message to the group. Eager not be left out of the golden opportunity to utilize the University resources at Harvard, I offered to send scanned copies or photocopies of the book to all interested members of the AssamNet.

HOLLIS catalog had shown the book to be available in Widener Library - the oldest (perhaps) and the most prestigious and aristocratically designed library at



Umesh Sharma

Harvard. For the book the instruction was to inquire at the circulation desk - which I did on Tuesday Feb 8th, at 3pm, after completing my part time job in the Conservation Department of Widener Library. I was told that the book is kept in a vault outside the library building and has to be requested, online, for viewing. The book would then be brought to the library. The circulation desk manager, very helpfully helped me

in requesting the book's delivery. I had to feed in my Harvard ID and PIN number to order for it online and was informed that it would be available the next day at 3 pm for viewing the Phillips Reading Room. Most likely, I would not be able to take it outside the room, the desk manager informed.

The next day, I checked with the computer lab attendants at Gutman library, in the Harvard School of Education, where I am based. They informed that there were plenty of scanners available for my use. Armed with this knowledge and after receiving an email from the Widener library that the book was now available for my use in the Philips Reading Room I went there.

I wanted to scan the original document, to preserve its authentic looks, yellow pages, grey cover etc., but I was informed that at Widener no scanners were available for student use. They suggested I check with the microfilm department or the conservation department (in the basement, where I worked and had electronic access system; entry to it is restricted). Neither had a scanner for digitization it directly it seemed, except for microfilming it first and then digitizing it. Ms Ethel Hellman (my boss) at the Conservation department, an expert in handling old documents exclaimed that it cannot be scanned at all or even photocopied (without a specialized machine)- since it cannot be flattened without damaging the pages. I requested her to try without flattening it. The first page turned out all right. She insisted on doing

the photocopies herself to avoid damaging the book (I am grateful to her for that help). In no time all the pages were copied and the book back with with the Reading Room staff.

That evening I went to the Gutman library and with the help of the student-employee I managed to get the scanning done - though each page was well above 1MB space even with PDF format. So I saved each page (or two ) in a separate file, which made it easier to send them as email attachments. Late that night (Feb9th) I emailed the scanned pages in 3 emails to Priyankoo-da and all members of the AssamNet who had

requested for a copy. I had to send in 3 emails because the total memory space used by the scanned pages was about 15MB.

The details of the book are given below.

*The Book:* The Bible. N.T. Matthew v-vii. Assamese. 1837.:

*The Title:* Sermon on the mount - in Ásamese. Yéshu Khrístor - úpadehor kothá.; From Dr. Carey's translation with alterations., Sad'iya: Printed at the American Baptist Mission Press, 1837

*Year acquired by Harvard University:* 1848

*Dimensions:* 6 inches by 9 inches

*Appearance:* Greyish cover, yellowish, brittle pages, but intact.

*Language:* Assamese words written in English alphabets

*Script:* Roman alphabets (English)

*Binding:* From the side thus pages could not be flattened on the scanner or photocopier - to take photo copies or do scanning.

*Pages:* 16 plus cover

*NOTE:* It was kept in a thick,white, "acid free" envelope

If anyone else needs a copy, please contact Jugal-da (jkalita@uccs.edu) or email me at jaipurschool@yahoo.com.

**By Umesh Sharma.** Umesh is an M.Ed student at Harvard University, Graduate School of Education Cambridge, MA 02138

## Xattriya for Tsunami Relief

THERE WAS A BEAUTIFUL performance of Xattriya in Denver, Colorado, by Bonmayuri Kalita and her students on the 30th of January, Sunday. Bonmayuri and 7 of her students, some as young as 6, performed beautifully for about 15 minutes in the Gates Concert Hall on the University of Denver campus. It was one of the best performances of the night. It was a fundraising event organized by the Asian Communities of Colorado. About 16,000 dollars were raised. Participants included Indian Community of Colorado Springs, Denver Thai Lions Club, Assamese Association of Colorado, Gamelan Tunas Mekar (Irian Jaya, Indonesia), Tamil Association of Colorado, The North Sumatra Vocal Group, Kerala Association of Colorado, Sri Lanka Association of Colorado, Colorado Telugu Association, Mudra Dance Studio and the Rebecca Dengler Group from West Sumatra.

Pictures or audio or video recordings were not allowed inside the auditorium during the performances.

There was a brief video clip of all the varied performances along with a little bit of Xattriya in a CBS



Channel 4 news report in Denver on Sunday, January 30.

The accompanying photograph shows the younger dancers right before the performance. The photographed dancers are Arushi Raval, Kuhu Basak, Devyanka Gupta, Tia Basak and Vanika Hans (from left to right). Three adult dancers not included are Mary Brehm, Sandhya Pejathaya and Bonmayuri Kalita. No photographs

where permitted inside the auditorium.

Bonmayuri teaches Xattriya and Bharatnatyam to about 30 students in Colorado. Bonmayuri and others are doing their bit to spread the beauty of Xattriya dance to the world. Let's congratulate them on this noble endeavor.

**By Jugal Kalita,** Colorado Springs Colorado

## Mechanization Strategies for Agriculture in Assam

THE LOWER LEVEL OF agricultural mechanization in Assam is one of the reasons of the lower agricultural productivity of the state (grain equivalent yield of Assam is only 1.61 t/ha in comparison to 5.26 t/ha in Punjab). Compared to the national level, the agricultural mechanization scenario in Assam is still in its infancy. The tractor population in Assam is only 2 per thousand hectares as against 82.5 per

are two characteristic features of Assam agriculture affecting the farm mechanization. In addition to the above distinguishing features of Assam agriculture, **the soil, climate and anthropometrics of human and animal** of this region are also different from the rest of the country. Therefore, the technology for agricultural mechanization prevalent in other regions cannot be directly adopted in this region.



thousand hectares for Punjab and 12.2 per thousand hectares in India as a whole (*based on assessment in the year 2000*). It has been proved without any doubt that appropriate agricultural mechanization programme ensures increase in land productivity by maintaining timeliness of operations and also by increasing the labour productivity.

**Small and fragmented land holdings** (more than 80% farm holdings are owned by small and marginal farmers with average holding size of 1.6 ha) and **dominancy of animate sources of farm power** (more than 85% of the farm power is contributed by human and animal sources of farm power)

Modification of the technology suiting to the agro-climatic, anthropometrics as well as socio-economic conditions of the state backed by appropriate research and development programme can only promote the agricultural mechanization in Assam. Keeping in view of the above some of the key issues, which need to be addressed for appropriate mechanization, are listed below:

Increase the utilization efficiency of existing animal power by providing matching improved animal drawn implements for critical farm operations.

Introduction of mechanical power sources (tractor & power tiller, stationary engine) under two specific cases viz. (i) large category of farms and (ii) other categories of farms to supplement the animal power in “time-critical” farm operations. The introduction of improved machinery for major farm operations viz. tillage, irrigation, inter-culturing, harvesting, threshing will economize the use of power sources by increasing the yearly use.

In order to address the existing problems (many of which have its root in poor socio-economic condition and unemployment) of the state, the agricultural mechanization strategy should be targeted to enhance employment opportunity in addition to maintain timeliness of farm operation and reduction of drudgery of farm operations. The local manufacturing facility of farm implements is to be developed. The appropriateness will also be ensured if implements are manufactured locally considering the local factors in addition to increasing the employment opportunity. Employment opportunity will also increase, as the mechanization programme should be appropriately backed up by technical personals.

**By D C Baruah.** Dr. Deben Baruah is an Associate Professor in Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, Assam).

The photograph shows that there is scope for mechanizing selective farm operations: view of a paddy farm using self propelled paddy transplanter at Jorhat.

## Flood Control in Assam- Task Force Recommendations

ANYONE EXPECTING FRESH zIDEAS about flood control in Assam from the Task Force that was set up by the Prime Minister of India last summer, has reasons to be disappointed after reading the recent report in the media (The Assam Tribune, dated Jan 20,2005) about its recommendations. One may recall that the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, during his November 2004 visit to Guwahati, promised to make floods “a thing of the past.” Sadly, the reported recommendations will in no way go far enough in achieving that goal. At best they will maintain a status quo at least up to the end of the 11th plan (Year 2012) and perhaps indefinitely. Whereas a bold and visionary approach was expected for a lasting solution of the extraordinary problem of flooding in Assam, the Task Force’s mindset thwarts creativity and accepts business as usual. Once again, the people of Assam are about to be led through an illusive path with no end to misery due to perennial flooding.

One should not doubt that the problem of flooding in Assam is an extraordinary one, and its solution naturally requires extraordinary measures and not a disappointing run-of-the mill approach. The solution cannot be anything short of an integrated, comprehensive, and revolutionary concept in view of the nature of the most rain-soaked Brahmaputra River basin. It is not going to be easy nor is it going to be cheap, but the alternative is essentially a condemnation of the Assamese people to a miserable life of “living with flood.” One must understand that floods in Assam can never be completely eliminated; however, it can be mitigated to avoid destructive consequences. Even then, the problem is of gigantic proportions given the reality of a peak discharge of 2.6 million cusec in the Brahmaputra river at Pandu and its inadequate carrying capacity



Umesh Tahbildar

along its course in Assam. Some of its tributaries may even be bankless at certain places resulting in widespread monsoon flooding. The Brahmaputra river has the highest specific yield (3.3 cusec per square mile) among all the mighty rivers of the world including the Yangtze, Mississippi, and the Ganges.

What we see in the reported recommendations is a rehash of an old approach without any serious sizing of the problem and without evolving a consistent stratagem based on an incisive expert engineering exploration and deliberation. It was an opportunity for the Task Force to convince the GOI with a viable, strong, and comprehensive long term solution, but the Task Force has contented itself with a timid and myopic view. There must be a vision to achieve the desired goal lest the people of Assam are subjected to a century of misery due to the ravaging effects of floods. Authorities should be undaunted by the enormity of the problem and aim to realize what is desired. Lecturing the poor sufferers who are mostly villagers to adjust to floods is a sign of a defeatist mentality and an antithesis to the profound responsibility of the government to the people whom it represents.

"The difficulty of the task is no reason for avoiding it," so said Mr. George W. Bush in another context

recently in his inaugural address for the second term as the president of the United States. Whether one supports Mr. Bush politically or not, this profound statement is applicable to how one views the solution of Assam’s flood problem. According to media report, the Task Force has recommended spending \$860 crores for short term flood control measures. It is an illusion to think that a mere Rs.860 crores will solve the flood problem in Assam. Compare that with Rs. 5,000 crores for Siang Middle( Syom) HEP, Rs. 560,000 crores for the controversial river-linking project, Rs. 300 crores for a hospital in Guwahati and Rs.600 crores (US\$136 million) for deepening the Columbia River three feet for a stretch of approximately 103 miles. It is difficult to get any sense out of the estimate for flood control in Assam.

The Task Force is making a pitch for nothing more than a stop gap, band-aid type of approach towards solving Assam’s flood problem This is not to say that the recommended strengthening of existing embankments and construction of elevated platforms for shelter need not be done, however, embankments alone cannot tame flooding in any reliable way as the history of the last fifty years of building more than 4,000 km of embankment in Assam has shown, not to mention their adverse effects. Setting up warning systems is also extremely desirable and a worthy recommendation. What is needed most, however, is a comprehensive, multi-pronged attack on the problem leaving no stone unturned to have a meaningful and lasting flood control in Assam. The Task Force has negated the dredging of the Brahmaputra river as unpractical. “Unpractical”and “living with flood” seem to be in the lexicon of a few in the water resource establishment in India, but it is time for Assam to rise above

that mindset because no one else faces a problem as serious. It is essential that dredging should also be factored into the equation for flood control solution. Beginning in the summer of 2005, part of the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington states of the USA will be dredged for a 165- km-long stretch at a cost of \$136 million. It is a 1200 mile river going through seven states in the USA and one Canadian province. The Columbia River drains a 259,000-square-mile basin. The dredging will deepen the river bed to 43 feet from the current 40 feet. It is estimated that 1.5 million truckloads of dredged material will be removed from the bed. The stretch of the Brahmaputra River from Dibrugarh to Dhubri is about 644 km long. The author used a simple EXCEL spread sheet computation to conclude that to dredge a one mile stretch of the Brahmaputra for one foot reduction of high stage at Pandu, would require approximately 100,000 (one hundred thousand) truckloads of material to be removed. Is that unpractical? I certainly don't think so. For dredging to be successful, there must be a corruption free administration of the project. I know that is a challenge given the existing socio-political climate, but Assam must be able to take that challenge.

People have the wrong notions about dredging on both sides- pro and con. Awhile ago it was reported in the Assam media that in 1978 Assam Government bought a single dredger to do the dredging job. It is not just a matter of buying one dredger. It is a mammoth task that has to be planned and executed carefully. It is, therefore, not surprising that it was a futile effort. Those who think it is just a matter of digging and putting the material on the banks are also mistaken for the fact that the material will soon find its way to the river bed again. Therefore, a creative solution will have to be sought for proper disposal. Systematic disposal to create two elevated highways and high grounds on the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra in parallel is one idea of mine. Other ideas will be out there. But they have to be judged on technical and other merits to come to a consensus among the experts. No such exercise has been performed to my knowledge. A solution will only come through serious brainstorming among the water resource experts perhaps in a long organized retreat. A few weeks ago, I wrote about this elsewhere to suggest that the government should immediately institute a "think tank" to arrive at a concept in a time-bound manner. It will certainly be worth it.

The Task Force has also recommended building dams in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra river; in fact, there are already plans to build a cluster of five dams on Siang (Dihang) and Subansiri already. But they are not going to make a dent in controlling floods, reducing only a meter or so of flood level downstream in the river. They are also controversial and in this author's opinion, very unwise in view of the extremely high seismicity of the region.

In summary, the recommendations of the Task Force are inadequate, and they should revisit the whole issue again in view of a comprehensive and lasting solution of the gigantic flood problem in Assam. Twenty three years have elapsed since the Brahmaputra Flood Control Board was instituted by no less an august body than the parliament of India, but the severity of flood sustains even today. It's time for deep soul searching and an earnest attempt to control flooding in Assam with commitment of resources and will.

*By Dr. Umesh C. Tahbilar,*  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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The ASA Newsletter is published monthly. Sanjib Bhuyan, NJ, on behalf of Assam Society of America, has published this issue of ASA newsletter. The editors are Satyam Bhuyan (Ames, Iowa), Ganesh Bora (Manhattan, Kansas), Babul Gogoi (New Delhi, India), Jugal Kalita (Colorado Springs, Colorado, Editor-In-Chief), Symanta Saikia (Wichita, Kansas), Santonu Goswami (El Paso, Texas), Vavani Sarmah (Secane, Pennsylvania), Ujjal Pathak (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), Rini Kakati (London, UK), Umesh Sharma (Cambridge, Massachusetts), and Ram Sarangapani (Houston, Texas). The ASA Executive Committee is composed of Sanjib Bhuyan, President (Franklin Park, New Jersey), Utpal Brahma, Vice President (Burlington, New Jersey), Ganesh Bora, General Secretary (Manhattan, Kansas), Probal Tahbilar (Kendall Park, New Jersey), Mantu Baishya (Omaha, Nebraska), Kedar Bhuyan (Mays Landing, New Jersey), and Sangeeta Duorah (California).

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