

Warli Painting in Maharashtra: Evolution and Transition

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Abstract:

The 'Incredible India' is known for its rich cultural heritage and diversification which comes from various strata of the Indian society. As we know India since ages have been a home for more than 2500 tribes and ethnic groups, a large part of India's cultural diversity is etched in the varied art forms of the country's indigenous people. We see that the contribution of the tribes is massive in the folk art of India which includes Dance, Drama, Music, Mask making, Carving, Basket making etc., out of these the most popular art form is "Paintings" of the tribal people because most of the tribes talk in monosyllabic languages but we see that they are more expressive through their paintings hence these paintings also act as a source to write and shape the history of communities.

These paintings are a reflection of their society which also helps them in creating and maintaining their identity. We see varieties of paintings amongst the tribal people such as Gond paintings, Bhil paintings, Pachmadi paintings, Madhubani paintings, Bhimbhetaka paintings and many more. Besides these paintings there is Warli painting unlike other it is very simple and made of only two colors, which makes them unique in itself.

Hence our area of focus is the 'Warli painting' done by the Warli Tribes residing majorly in the state of Maharashtra and Gujarat. A lot of people talk about Warli paintings but through our paper, we would draw the attention towards the evolution and transition which has taken place with in these paintings.

KEYWORDS: Traditional paintings, Transition, Warlis, chauk paintings, Tribes, Natural, Indian Culture.

Introduction:

Paintings in India are done on various materials such as walls, floors, wood, textiles etc. Paintings in India shows the rich aesthetic and imaginative skills what people have and we see the same from the tribal people of the country. Paintings play a very important role amongst the tribes because these paintings are a reflection of their tribal life and society and through them they express their feelings of joy, sorrow, celebrations, religious aspects, dance etc. these paintings are done with natural colours which make them more authentic and show the knowledge of these tribal people, their paintings are normally done with the help of geometric shapes. These paintings come under ethnographic art.

Objectives of the Study

- To study and analyse the tribal paintings of India specific to the warli tribe.
- To trace the evolution of the paintings
- To highlight the significance of the tribe as well as their paintings.
- To help in preserving and documenting their community and culture.
- To spread more knowledge and awareness about these paintings.

Limitations of the Study:

In recent years tribal studies have gained popularity but to a very large extent, a lot of work is yet to be done on tribes. Because the studies which are already done on tribes are the works of the Britishers and the non-tribal people which might lead us to a biased first-hand knowledge of tribal people. Apart from this there is availability of books on tribes but it is mostly found in the regional languages. Which brings a huge crisis to the people who cannot communicate or write in other languages apart from English.

Another aspect to this study is that, Warli paintings are done in many parts of Maharashtra as well as Gujarat with furthermore varieties within the paintings, which occurs due to the change from one region to another. Hence our focus will be restricted and focused in one area (Dahanu Taluka, District Palaghar).

Research Methodology

The approach of this study is empirical in nature and in my research study we have majorly used primary sources and oral sources with secondary sources which has helped me in stating my evidences which I was able to collect through my field visit,

Descriptive method is also used to write and put the research in a particular format. Data is collected through extensive interviews, discussions, observations with Warli artists, people from Warli community, visiting libraries, and questionnaire, talking in-depth and heart to heart with Warli women during the field visit to Dahanu taluka, District Palaghar

Background of Warli Tribe:

To understand Warli paintings we first need to understand the tribe's culture, their society hence first we will discuss about the Warli Tribe.

As we were blessed and grateful to get an opportunity to visit the tribal community residing in Dahanu taluka which is 2.5 hours away from Mumbai and we were able to observe their lives closely and as per our experience these tribes are very simple people with a very simple lifestyle. They are one of those communities who believes in unity which was visible to me through their marriage ceremony and other events and majorly through their paintings. They are away from the mainstream world and are not tempted by worldly materials which has made them people who are always grounded.

Warli tribe follow joint family system and recognize each other as 'Kutabis' i.e. of the same 'Kutumb'- clan. They live in small conical huts which was made of wooden frame, bamboo strips, straw and leaves. They have windowless, spacious at times and simple structural houses with their own domestic animals like dogs, goats, hens and even cows. Their religion is

based on awe and fear, they worship gods chiefly to avoid their wrath with spirits and have faith in Tiger God (Vaghai) because tiger is considered as a symbol of life and regeneration. It is also their totemic symbol. Further their clothing is scanty and minimal as per their need which will help them to move freely. They even have their own entertainment, ‘**Dhumsa Dance**’ where people form a chain by holding each other’s arms and dance in a circular format with the beats and a traditional music is played with a traditional instrument known as ‘Dhumsi’.



Origin of the painting:

As we were going through few books during my research we came across ‘The Painted World of the Warlis’ by ‘Yashodhara Dalmia’ in her book she claims that, the painting’s history dates back to 3000BCE to 2500 BCE which comes under the Neolithic period. Their murals are similar to those done between 500 and 10,000 BCE in rock shelters of Bhimbetaka in Madhya Pradesh¹.

¹ Dalmia. Yashodhara, The Painted World of the Warlis : Art and Ritual of Warli Tribes of Maharashtra, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1988, 233pg.



Bhimbetaka cave paintings

Warli Paintings:

Warli painting is an indigenous art done by the Warli tribes living in parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The name Warli comes from the word 'Warla' which means 'a piece of land'. It is associated to them due to their profession of being agriculturalists and it clearly reflects in their paintings.

The history of this painting dates back to prehistoric times as there are shreds of evidence found through cave paintings which highly resembles the Warli paintings of today. And hence we see that it is practised and preserved in the community since ages.

Traditionally these paintings were done on mud walls of their houses by including only two colors white and brown which was obtained naturally. It is of religious and cultural importance to their community because the paintings were done on special occasions and events such as marriage, harvesting and sowing seasons or some religious days. And the central motif in each ritualistic painting is the square known as the "CHAUK" which are of two types, **Lagnchauk** and **Devchauk**.

During our research we also came to know that, these religious paintings were generated when the male member of the family went for hunting and women stayed home alone, and to get rid away with the fear they created images of natural gods who later became their protector as per their belief.

Colours and materials:

Materials and colours used in this Warli painting are very simple as they are in their lives. They make use of only two colours red which is obtained from (Geru) and White is obtained from Rice paste and at times they also make use of cow dung because the houses they lived in were made of mud hence to keep it clean they use to smear cow dung and paint on it.

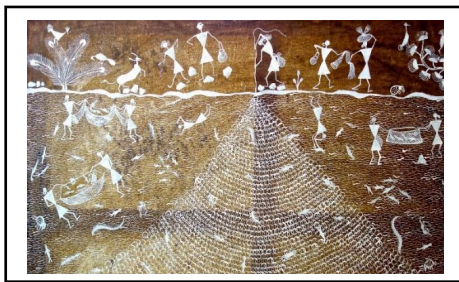
For the brush, they used bamboo sticks which is chewed from one side so that it serves the purpose of brush and a lot of other times they used the dried stick of the rice saplings. They also use to make paintings by doing palm and foot impressions on walls. There are very rare

events where the painters used other colours in the paintings such as red, yellow, blue and black which again was obtained from the natural substances such as yellow from wild jackfruit or turmeric, black from coal, red from *Rubia cordifolia* etc. with the help of these organic colors they complete their paintings.

Themes in Warli paintings:

In Warli paintings, we see a variety of themes and elements which mostly revolves around their social-cultural-religious life and their very close relationship with Mother Nature which they represent through images of sun, moon, water, mountains, birds and animals of all kinds. But when we have to classify the themes into major categories then we see paintings of their ‘Daily Life’ and ‘Cultural-Religious Life’.

- Social or Daily life painting
- Cultural painting
- Religious painting
- Seasonal painting
- Ritualistic painting
- Paintings of natural elements



Chauk Paintings:

Today, Warli painting is popularly known for the representation of socio-cultural life and their association with nature, but not many people know that there is a transition which is going on within the Warli painting. We call it as ‘Transition within Transition of the paintings’. During our interview with Prof. Chetan Garuda who himself is from the Warli community and is Assistant Professor of Physics in Mumbai University we came to know that earlier the Warli painting was not to represent their aspects of life, the sole purpose of the painting was ritualistic and that too only the marriage ceremony and he also said that these godly paintings came into existence out of fear because when women use to stay at home situated in dense forest areas, there were many things to fear about and to protect their houses and themselves they created these paintings as a symbol which will protect them from evil spirits.

Hence we see that the original Warli paintings comprised of gods and goddesses and the most important painting in their community are ‘LAGNA CHAUK’ and ‘DEV CHAUK’ which is done only by the women of the community during the marriage ceremony that too in a traditional manner. This painting is slowly getting faded, even when people are documenting about the Warli paintings they are not really able to focus on the original art

because people are focusing more on the other style of Warli painting which has arrived much later.

But this original art is more important as it has folksongs related to it. Which fast moving life these songs are also vanishing because modernization has seeped in their community and the upcoming generation are not able to carry it further.

We now see that, the paintings today are professionally done by male artist with minimum background knowledge. With this, we also see Hinduism and Christianity influence due to assimilation or at times conversion.

We can say that the identity of the Warli tribes is in crises. Hence it becomes important to preserve and record their stories.

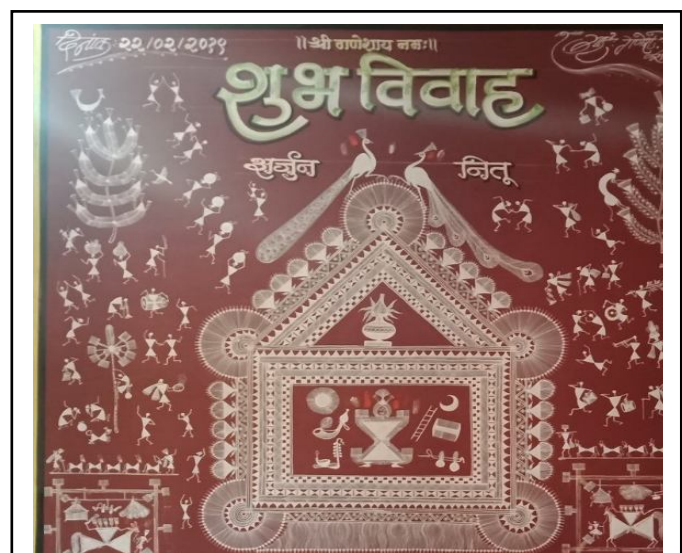
And we were privileged to go to these Warli tribes in Dahanu and attend their marriage ceremonies through which we were able to record their activities which goes behind while they do these paintings.

It is a process done with utmost patience and happiness, which they express through folk songs. Due to this visit, we were able to witness the social life and religious life of their community. The impact of modernization has already seeped in the community and we could witness it because when we went there, we could see women painting the DEV CHAUK in their traditional manner but to make LAGNA CHAUK professional Warli artist (all men) were invited to paint and on top of that they were paid whereas women did the same work with no payment as they are carrying the legacy. We could see that slowly the concept of equality in the community will also go as they are highly influenced and surrounded by the non-tribal people.

LAGNA CHAUK:

‘*Lagna*’ this word means marriage and ‘*Chauk*’ means a square which represents a house, one will easily find a *Lagna chauk* in every house of Warli community. The name itself tells us, this painting is done only during the wedding time and that too a day before the actual marriage ceremony takes place.

The painting starts early in the morning and it takes the entire day to complete it, once the painting is done then it is kept in secrecy under a veil, until the next day. They unveil it once the Bhagat.



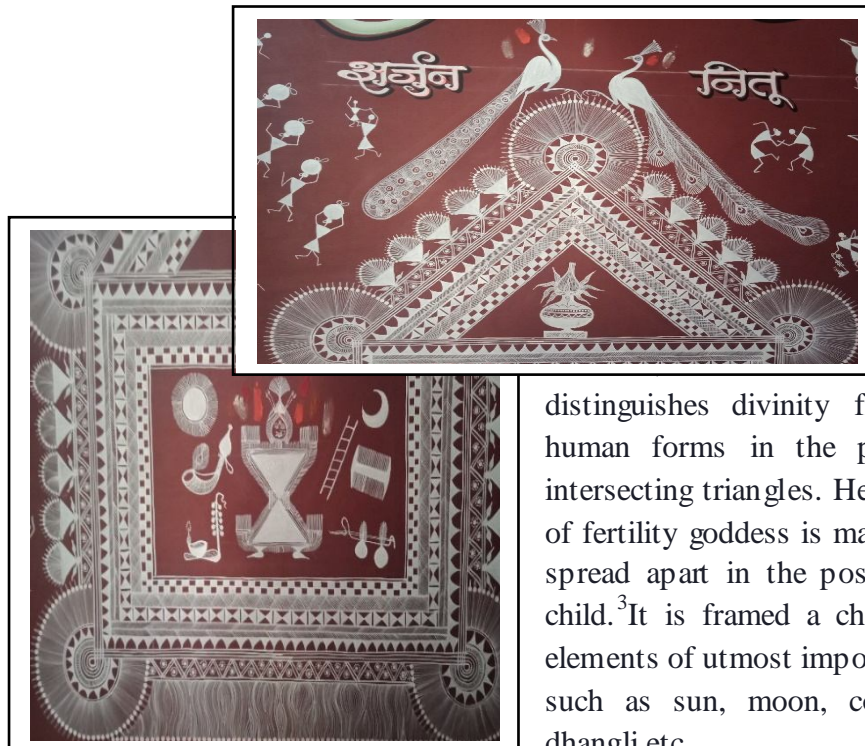
Process of making ‘Lagna chauk’

The painting starts with smearing red mud (geru) on the wall and then with the rice paste the painting is done. The *suvasinis* (married women from the community) start making

the paintings by drawing the *chauk*, which is placed in the centre and in that square they paint the 'vegetable goddess *Palaghat*'.

Palaghat goddess is the god of trees and plants who presides over marriage and she is aware with the primeval process of death and birth, the people in the community believe that these are contained within the very womb of the mother.

The picture of the goddess is created by the formation of two triangles, one pointing upward and representing the male element- the erect stone – and the other side is facing downwards and that symbolizes female principle- the embodiment of all creative energy.²



Ghat – the embodiment of this form is a creation in this picture, they keep it in the position of the two triangles do not have the characteristics that

distinguishes divinity from man. Because other human forms in the painting are depicted by intersecting triangles. Hence we see that the figure of fertility goddess is made with the hands and feet spread apart in the position of giving birth to a child.³ It is framed a *chauk* which consist of few elements of utmost importance to a married couple, such as sun, moon, comb, stairs, lamp, tarpa, dhangli etc

²Sudha, Satyawadi, *Unique Art of Warli Paintings*, D. K. Print World, New Delhi, 2010, pp 26-27

³Satyawadi Sudha, *Unique Art of Warli Paintings*, D.K.Print World Ltd, 2010, 39pg

With this we see, on top of the chauk they draw a peacock which represents male and a peahen which represents female and on top where we see the conical roof we see a pot which is an auspicious element for the marriage ceremony. With this the small chauk is done but to complete the entire marriage ceremony in one painting they draw other elements which complete the entire wedding, in modern language we can call is a photo album which we create for our memory and through pictures we see all the important people, activities, events which goes simultaneously with the ceremony and that is why we see elements such as Tadi tree, Khajur tree, dancing, ids playing, women doing puja, people consuming alcohol, women filling water etc. with all of these the chauk gets completed.



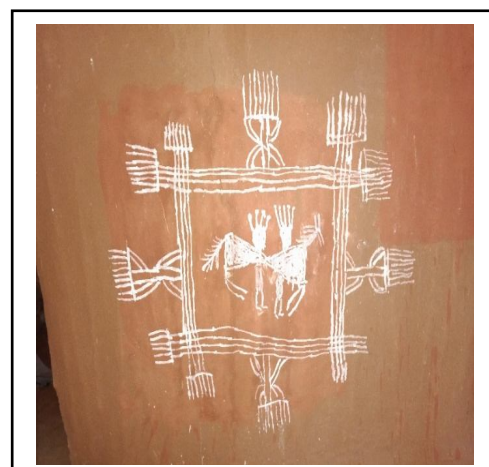
This shows that the community focuses on their groups and their society at large which is exactly opposite in the nontribal society,

through this we also see that this langa chauk tells us a story of what goes in the preparation of the wedding and how the entire village takes part in this process. The speciality of the painting is that it is done with utmost detailing and care because it stays in the house forever.

- Here in the image we can see various other elements in Lagna Chauk, people with musical instruments, some carrying the pots on their head and few carrying loads.
- This is a clear representation of how a marriage ceremony takes place in their community.

DEV CHAUK:

Dev means god and *chauk* means a square, which together means god in the house. This painting is done on walls during the marriage ceremony on the adjacent sides of the Lagna chauk also known as 'chauk writing' it is done only in Warli community that too only by married women. According to the marriage rituals, the chauk is drawn by 'Suvasanis', (Suvasani is a married woman whose husband is alive).



This chauk is drawn in a very traditional manner which includes reciting folk songs while the painting is done and once it is complete they veil the painting with a cloth which can be unveiled only during the marriage rituals with recitation of

some hymns related to the required rituals with this the Bhagat who act as a Brahmin in Warli

wedding plays 'Daka' which is a musical instrument similar to a small drum played by lord Shiva.

Once the painting is unveiled then the marriage rituals start and as the process goes on the bridegroom apply turmeric and vermilion to the *Dev chauk*. This shows that the painting plays an important role in their tradition and community.

Elements in Dev Chauk:

A square is drawn with four lines on all sides, out of which the square represents the house and four lines along with it represent the four pillars which help the house to stand. The square is surrounded with a structure known as 'Daka' or 'Danka' similar to a small drum which Lord Shiva holds in his hands. Inside the chauk, there is a picture of a horse which is a part of the wedding and on that horse image of two gods are drawn one from the bride's side and other from the groom's side. Out of these two gods, one with the four strokes on head belongs to the bride's side and one with five strokes of line on head belongs to the groom's side and with all these elements the chauk is complete.

Process of making the painting:

Before the painting starts the rice is soaked in water for 1 or 2 hours, after that the rice is placed in a mortar, with the help of pestle a powder form of rice is created (at times the mortar is dug in the house itself and with a heavy wooden log the powder is formed). Once the powder is made then water is added to it and the paste with thick consistency is ready to paint on the walls.

A particular area is selected to draw the painting and with the help of red colour (geru) the entire wall is painted and the rice paste is painted on the wall. Two dev chauks are painted on adjacent sides of the Lagna chauk, if the chauk is drawn in bride's house then the horse will face outward in the painting indicating the girl is going from the house and if the painting is done in the groom's house then the horse will be faced inwards because the girl is coming in the house.

This also shows the importance of women in their community and how everything revolves around women during the marriage ceremony and hence we see that these paintings play a very important role in the lives of Warli women

Evolution and the transition of the painting:

With modernization seeping in the society of tribal and nontribal people, we see a lot of changes that have taken place in the Warli paintings. There are changes in colours, style and even themes and motifs of the paintings have changed. Now the painting is not just in white and red with natural colours but now we see it in other



colours such as green, yellow, blue, pink and even black, which is considered inauspicious amongst the Warli tribes.

With change in the use of colours we also see the paint that has changed from organic natural paints to oil colours, acrylic colours, poster colours and fabric colours as per the requirements. This change has come because it is no longer done just on the walls of the houses of the communities but it is also done on stations, offices, for tourism purposes, on pots, clothes, bags etc. Due to which we see changes in the themes of these paintings, instead of just rural life depiction now we see images of train, schools, buses, cars, industries, television, radio, and many other contemporary themes which are more relatable to the urban society. This evolution has both negative and positive sides but it shows the evolution of a rudimentary painting fitting into modern frames of people's life.

Commercialization of the paintings:

Origin of Commercialization:

It all started 4 decades ago in the early 70s there came a fresh breeze from the mainstream society which led to the transition of the painting. With the help of 'Pupul Jayakar' the women who unearthed many Indian folk idiom along with her field assistant Bhaskar Kulkarni was a voyage of rediscovery, first they discovered the rich and colorful Madhubani Art and then the amazing idiom of Warli art that shunned the use of all colours except two red and white⁴, with the help of Indian government **Warli** painting was discovered for the mainstream society and people were surprised to see Warli painting done only with two colours unlike the other tribal paintings Jivya Soma Mashe, a man who belonged to the Warli tribe was invited to New Delhi for the demonstration of their community art.

At the event he drew the figure of Palaghat the goddess of fertility sitting in the centre of an intricately drawn temple, his painting was not appealing to the non-tribal people, so people told him to draw more visuals but he couldn't and he admitted honestly that this is all that every Warli artist knows to draw.

'The ritualistic drawing of the goddess which is painted on the walls of Warli house on the day of the wedding' and after this event he returned home but it did not stop here.

Pupul Jayakar went to Jivya Soma Mashe to encourage him to break the shackles of convention and depict mythology and evocative legends of their tribe in their inimitable warli style and she was successful in doing it. Later we see Jivya Mashe had full energy to help other artists as well and he went back to his village and had meetings with other fellow artists.

Once the artist got liberated from the shackles of strict traditions of ritualistic painting the gates were opened and out flowed to explore new areas. And from then warli art moved from depiction of gods to depiction of mortals.

After the recognition there came a rapid change in the Warli paintings and new trends came into existence such as paintings on canvas, wood, cloth etc.

⁴ Tribal art and Culture: The Warlis- The paintings on the walls by Gangadharan Menon – 21st November, 2012

Further when we analyse the painting from a gender perspective we see that, earlier the paintings were done only by women in their community during the ceremonies but now it has shifted and the paintings are done by the male members of the community because they are more easily accessible to go to somebody's house or some other state etc. and women are not able to do that due to the mind-set of Indian society or the system of patriarchy which has seeped in their society as well. Men who are an artist are getting the opportunity to have national and international exhibitions and shows to run their livelihood.

This massive commercialization is dominating the original art works, hence this new style of painting by the Warli artists after the 1970s focuses on showing the social life of their community and has added more relevant aspects which the mainstream people will be able to relate. But because of this, we see that there is a transition within the paintings which has taken place and this is not known to many people.



This is a horse with image of god, done in the 'dev chaulk' was found on the railway station walls in various different colours.

The negative and positive impact of commercialization on the Warli Painting-

- In the commercialized world, Warli paintings have helped a lot in developing new sources of income.
- People from the tribal community have got a new platform to showcase their talent.
- Warli community takes a lot of pride after its popularity.

- This painting is not just famous in India but also all over the world.
- Great designers have inculcated these Warli art elements in their designer outfits such as Manish Arora.
- Nowadays there are classes for students to train them and learn this art form which we mostly find in urban areas but due to this the original tribes who should get the actual credit are not even coming into picture and artist from the urban area is making money out of it.
- Commercial markets are making using of this art through a wide range of products such as pottery, bamboos, T-shirts, Mugs, Greeting Cards, Handkerchief, Pen stand, key chain, coasters, wall hangings, table runners scarfs, fancy pots etc. and the original artist is still in villages with zero profit. And even if they get employment but their labour pay is less.
- Commercialization has taken over women artist and has forced them to stay in walls which is the opposite of tribal community's feature.
- Paintings are wrongly done because they do not have proper background knowledge due to which we see paintings of Warli gods on the roadside, stations or even on footwear, this can hurt their sentiments.
- These paintings are highly used for tourism because people from all around the world like to see traditional India and its art forms and due to this the hotels, institutes and art studios are making a crazy amount of money.
- A lot of plagiarism is also happening of this painting and government is not taking the right action against it.



Commercial use of the Warli Painting

Conclusion:

The culture of India is one of the oldest in the world, it is rich and diverse due to the importance which India as a nation gives them. It is our duty to keep it in mind that the originality of culture and tradition should not be destroyed under promotion of art. These days through commercialized medium we see misinterpretation and malpractice of these art forms. This action affects various segments of the society. Heritage is always connected to people's sentiment hence we need to be very careful before we set out anything.

These tribal communities play a massive role in preserving our heritage and I would like to conclude, after going through so many books, articles and having my own experience by visiting Dahanu, reaching out to the community and spending so much quality time with them, I have realized that these people are the most simplest and innocent beings. They are grounded because they respect every culture. They are aware and have complete knowledge about everything they are surrounded with, they are humble and welcoming. Hospitality and opening about their culture and tradition was an eye-opener for me. And with their help, I can gather information in its utmost authentic form.

One thing which kept on bothering me was, that there are changes coming in the community and the authenticity is disappearing in a very slow pace. Their customs and traditions are slowly getting influenced by the Hindus and Christians around them. I came across expensive weddings and even the wedding card of their community are written in English or Marathi instead of their own language, there was not Warli god or goddess just some Hindu gods and Christian symbols. Massive assimilation can lead to destruction of tiny cultures which are prevailing in small pockets of India.

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