

Vaisnav Devotion and Conflict: Doctrinal Differences Between The Gaudiyas And The Vallabhites And Its Implications

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ABSTRACT : *This paper is a comparative study of the doctrinal differences between two Hindu (Vaisnavite) sects of medieval India. The purpose is to highlight the diversity within the later Bhakti movement, in an attempt to question the usual characterization of the sagun bhakti movement as monolithic. It points out the key elements of the philosophy of each of the sect and tries to demonstrate how they could have generated conflict between the sects.*

KEY WORDS: *Braj, competition, Gaudiya, sectarian identity, Vaisnav, Vallabh,*

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the oldest religions known to man, Hinduism has seen many formative phases in its long history. One such formative period in the development of Hindu religiosity occurred in the medieval centuries, and in the context of north India, especially from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries during what has been referred to as the Bhakti movement. In this essay, even as I provide a brief history of the Bhakti movement, and the scholarship on it, my main focus is to further nuance our understanding of the movement itself. More specifically, I look at two important sects- the Gaudiyas and the Vallabha sect- who were instrumental in reviving Hindu (Vaisnav) devotionalism. The aim, in this paper, is to highlight the diverse nature of this devotionalism despite a shared religious iconography. Thus both the sects being discussed here were worshippers of Krishna (indeed one of them is the progenitor of the ISKCON movement). And yet, the conflicts between the two were just as intense and even violent as between any two rival groups. In this essay, my intention is to basically make a study of the doctrinal differences between the two sects, but simultaneously, there was also occurring a competition for political patronage, for pilgrim centres, and indeed for devotees between these sects.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

The medieval age was one of intense activity in terms of the sentiment towards devotion. It has been the focus of much research and the historiography on the Bhakti movement is quite extensive indeed. Max Weber has interpreted the rise of various sects in this period in terms of the orthodox restoration in India. However, this 'orthodox' restoration was not a total return to the past. According to Weber, one sign of this was the rise in the importance of Puranic literature.

Unlike the past where scholarly pre-eminent Brahmin families were the authors of any religious literature, in this period, it was the temple priest and the wandering monk who were the composers. Further, "emotional" and folk elements were also incorporated into the value systems. An example of this was the elevation and transformation of the ancient feminine fertility cult into the status of the wives of the Brahmanical gods. According to Weber there were two factors at play in this transformation. Firstly the Brahmans wished to protect the many perquisites and incidental fees which were available if one accepted the service of these 'ineradicable' folk deities. There was also the example of the Buddhist and Jain traditions, which had been successful primarily due to amalgamation with the folk tradition. Weber also argues that as a form of emotional redemption religion, Bhakti quite naturally became the primary form of the religious aspirations of the middle classes. Referring to the rise of the Vallabh and Chaitanya sect, Weber describes it as a victory of "Orgiasticism" over "Brahmanical contemplation". H.H Wilson's study of religious sects, first published in Asiatic Researches in 1828 described in detail the sects of North India. His Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus (1846) described the religion of the Vaishnavs as 'bhakti.' Dr. R.G Bhandarkar was among the first to systematize the entire gamut of religious systems within the rubric of Hinduism. He pointed out that the Bhagwadgita contained the earliest exposition of the doctrine of Bhakti. According to Dr. Irfan Habib, Bhakti was the answer to the religious needs of the newly economically empowered communities such as the Jats and artisans in North India. A great deal of agricultural expansion had occurred in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Jats who were initially pastoralists now became agriculturists. Similarly, there was great increase in craft

production under the Turks who provided state encouragement to it through the karkhanas. Artisans gave up their hereditary professions and joined new crafts and became wealthy. These communities realized that while their economic situation had improved, socially they were still not considered on the same footing. They thus turned towards the new socio-religious spaces that were being offered by Bhakti ideology. According to Satish Chandra the seventh to the twelfth centuries were marked by the rise of the Rajputs whose social origins were not very clear. In return for the legitimization of their rule by the Brahmins, the Rajputs took it upon themselves to maintain the privileges of the Brahmins and to preserve the varna order. However, with the coming of the Turks this arrangement was destroyed and thus bhakti sects with radical ideologies had the opportunity to emerge in this period.

Recent scholarship on the Bhakti movement has tended to divide the forms of devotion into two — the *nirgun* and the *sagun* — on the basis of the nature of divinity. The *nirgun* school refers to devotion to a formless entity while the *sagun* bhaktas (who are in majority) are devotees of a physical god. Thus saints such as Kabir and Ravi Das are *nirgun bhaktas*, while Vallabh, Chaitanya, Tulsidas, Meera all belong to the *sagun* school. Alongside this distinction has also developed an argument which characterizes the *nirgun* philosophy as the more egalitarian. It is argued that the *sagun* Saints maintained a more orthodox attitude. However, the dynamism of many of these sects such as the Vallabh and the Gaudiyas, transcended limitations of caste and class (at times even creed) in the larger attempt to recruit followers, and in the competition for patronage. In this way they were alike. But precisely for this reason they were also competitors. Dr. R.P. Bahuguna has argued for a diversity of religious movements in the context of the later *sant parampara*. It would not be wrong to say that the same also holds true for the sectarian Vaishnavite movements examined here. Even as these sects sought to perpetuate their own traditions, these traditions also often got modified due to the exigencies of survival.

More recently, Krishna Sharma has questioned the current understanding of Bhakti. She argued that bhakti by itself did not imply any ideology. Further what has been interpreted as the 'bhakti movement' was an amalgam of a number of devotional movements of different orientations. However, while Sharma's attempt at problematizing the simplistic definition of the Bhakti movement is an important step forward, yet her conclusions still make some assumptions which are not always accurate. Thus she accepts the *nirgun sagun* distinction as well as the characterization of *sagun* bhakti as a conservative force. At one point she also argues that "a strong sense of a separate Hindu identity is sometimes detectable in some of the Vaisnav bhaktas." It is difficult to accept this contention. Even if there was some awareness of shared beliefs, it is more sectarian identity, rather than "Hindu identity" which seems to be emphasized. There is a huge corpus of primary literature dealing with the belief systems of each sect. But these articulations of religious experience, often in the form of hagiographies are also embedded in a historical context. Consequently, they do provide some historical information. Moreover, they reflect the worldview of members of the sect in a very vivid manner. One of the primary texts used for the present essay is the Chaurasi Vaishnavan Ki Varta. Unlike many of the Sanskrit texts of the Vallabhite sect, the Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta is written in Braj Bhasa. This was important as it meant that it could be understood by most members of the community. Another text that has been used is the Chaitanyacharitamrita of Krishnadas Kaviraj. Completed in 1584, the text is a biographical account of Chaitanya's life. It is divided into three parts, or khandas. The first deals with the boyhood of Chaitanya, the madhya lila deals with the active period of travel while the anta deals with the later phases of his life.

III. THE VAISNAV TRADITION

Vaisnav implies membership of that community of believers whose chief deity is Vishnu or one of his many forms such as Ram or Krsna. Vishnu is first mentioned as a minor deity in the Rg Veda. Since then, Vaisnavism imbibed various influences such as the belief in Narayana. Another important strain was the conception of the child cowherd god— Krsna. ---In the Harivamsa (a supplement to the Mahabharata) and the Vishnu Puran we see Krsna coming on to his own, as a divine yet a very human figure. By the early seventh century A.D, new forms of devotion also emerged. In the Bhagvad Gita we find the importance of Bhakti being stressed. Three ways to salvation—*karma* (action), *jnana* (knowledge), and *bhakti* (devotion) are discussed but of these, *bhakti* is commended as the best way. Further it declared that Krsna was identical with the Supreme Being (*purusottama*). For some time after the eighth century, the doctrine of Bhakti was challenged by the spiritual monism preached by Sankaracharya. However it was soon replaced by the resurgence of Bhakti from the eleventh century onwards. In Southern India, this new form of devotion —one which was passionate and emotional—became the language in which the veneration to Vishnu came to be expressed. The twelve Alvars— Tamil poet saints composed devotional poems in honour of Vishnu and his *avatars* (incarnations). The theme of love in separation was a recurring idea in Alvar poetry

The Alvars were followed by one of the most important works in the history of the Vaisnav faith—and especially in the context of the two sects being discussed here—that is, the Bhagvat Purana. Composed around A.D 850–A.D 950 in Sanskrit, it was probably also composed in Southern India. The Puran served as a standard source for some of the main traditions of Krsna devotion. Many of these ideas however were themselves already current in the popular religion of the people at the time of its composition. The Bhagvat Purana presented Krsna’s actions as divine *lila* for the purpose of bestowing grace. Thus, in the text, the demons he defeats are often destined to salvation unlike in the Harivamsa where they are merely disposed off. For both the Caitanyites and the Vallabha sect, the Bhagvat Purana was an extremely important text. In the development of Vaisnavism, the contribution of Jayadeva’s Gitagovind also needs to be mentioned, especially in the context of North India. Jayadeva—a minister in the court of Lakshman Sena of Bengal composed the Sanskrit work in the twelfth century. It is perhaps the earliest extensive treatment of Radha. The poem celebrates the love between Radha and Krishna and also uses it as an allegory to portray the soul’s longing for the divine. R.S McGregor has argued that the overtly sensuous nature of the poetry was in response to a collective emotional need resulting from the psychological and social tensions which were on the rise during the early centuries of Muslim rule. The Gitagovind was one of the inspirations of Vidyapati—a poet who wrote in a language which both speakers of Hindi and Bengali claim as their own. Vidyapati’s poetry was usually sung and in many ways it contributed to the development of devotional practices which characterized the Vaisnavite movement of the later period.

For believers, devotion to a particular form of Vishnu did not negate the divinity of other forms. Rather they hierarchically relegated the latter to different positions. Thus it should be borne in mind that what occurred was *not homologization*. Each believer understood that his chosen form was the “complete Godhead” and that the other forms were his manifestations. In the context of this essay we need to remember this point at all times in order to understand the relationship between the sects. The traditional framework of Vaisnav organization is the *catuh sampraday* (the four *sampradays*). The term *sampraday* has usually been understood as “sect.” However, ‘sect’ here does not carry the connotations of a breakaway group, but rather is used to signify a vehicle for transmitting and perpetuating a tradition. Accordingly, sect has also been rendered as ‘tradition.’ According to Clooney and Stewart, to qualify as a *sampraday* involved the systematization of a theology which was supported by a set of rituals that were devised for both the public and the private sphere. In Vaisnavism, it is held that there were four traditional sampradays. These sampradays include the Shrivaisnav sampraday which originated in Tamil Nadu, the Madhava Sampraday (he was also known as Anandtirtha), whose founder lived in Karnataka, the Nimbarka Sampraday, whose founder lived in Andhra Pradesh and the Rudra Sampraday established by Vishnuswami. These *sampradays* continue to exist, however a number of other sects have also emerged over time. Most of these claim some relationship with one of the four *sampradays*. Thus the Gaudiyas are considered to be a part of the Madhava tradition while the Vallabhites are linked to the Rudra Sampraday.

A brief life sketch of Vallabha and Caitanya would be useful here since as charismatic individuals, some of the personal choices that both the leaders made often had important implications for the theology of the sects. Born in 1479, Vallabha was the son of a Tailang Brahmin named Lakshman Bhatta (of modern Andhra Pradesh). It is said that it had been prophesied that an avatar of Vishnu would be born in the family. On a pilgrimage to the holy places in North India Lakshman Bhatta’s wife Illamma gave birth to a son during a stopover at Camparanya in modern Madhya Pradesh. However, as the child showed no signs of life, the couple concluded that he was still-born. They left the baby at the foot of a nearby Shami tree (the wood of the tree is used for ritual purposes). However, that very night, in an act of divine intervention, Krsna appeared in Lakshman Bhatt’s dream and told him that the infant was alive. When the anxious parents returned, they found the child playing, surrounded by a ring of blazing fire which had protected him the previous night. Lakshman Bhatt now decided to return to Varanasi. Here the young Vallabh spent his childhood mastering the Vedas and the Puranas. This prepared him for a lifetime of debate over rival philosophies, where he made winning a habit. At Puri, where Lakshman Bhatt was on another pilgrimage along with his wife and son, a *shastrartha* (a formal philosophical debate) was taking place. The young Vallabh participated in the debate and was able to defeat all the learned men. When the latter refused to acknowledge their defeat, God Jagannatha himself testified to Vallabh’s wisdom. The next journey of Vallabha was perhaps the most important of all his journeys. This time he went to Braj. The journey was the result of a dream in which Krsna had commanded Vallabh to go to Braj and reveal the divine identity of the *svarupa* (manifestation- in form of an idol here) that had manifested itself on the Govardhan hill. This was a defining moment for the history of the sect. During his pilgrimage to the temple of Vittalnath at Pandharpur, Vallabha got the divine order to get married. Vallabhacharya did not preach a life of renunciation. Most of his close companions including the *ashtasakhas* were householders. (In fact their worldliness has earned them the epithet of “Epicureans of the East” by F.S Growse).

This had important consequences in the context of sect organization. There is no provision for asceticism in Vallabha's sect. Indeed it is often looked down upon since it breeds pride which leads to the destruction of Bhakti. Moreover by ensuring progeny, the leadership of the sect would also now remain in the Vallabha family. Vallabha did not however take settle down in Braj. He made his home at Adel, near Allahabad. His first son Gopinath was born in 1510 and in 1515 his second son Vitthalnath was born. In 1530, Vallabha died at Varanasi.

Vallabhacharya's philosophy is called *Shuddhadvaita* (Pure Non dualism) and the path postulated by him is called the Pushti marg. His teachings are based on the Gita and Vedanta texts as well as the Bhagvat Purana. According to Vallabh, the Supreme Being, Krsna, is personal. He has all auspicious qualities and his nature is fundamentally composed of three features—*sat-cit-anand*. Sat refers to simple existence, cit means awareness and ananda implies the ability to take pleasure. Through *aisvarya*(almighty power) the *sat* part of Krsna is manifested as '*jagat*' or the world. The *jivas* or human souls are manifestations of the sat and cit part of Krsna. They are rendered impure by *avidya*—which itself is a power of Krsna which makes them forget that they are a part of Krsna. There are three kinds of *jivas*(human souls)—*pusti, maryada, and pravaha*. The first two are called *daivi jivas* or divine beings. It is for their *uddhara*(can be translated as salvation or rescue) that Vallabha and Vitthalnath have appeared on earth. The way to remove the impurities of the *jiva* is through a series of nine steps of *bhakti* namely—*shravana*(hearing of the name of Krsna), *kirtan*(singing aloud of the names and virtues of Krsna), *smarana*(remembrance), *pad sevana*(worshipping the feet of Krsna), *arcana*(worship of the *svarupa*), *vandana*(homage), *dasya*(service), *sakhya* (companionship) and finally *atmanivedana*(complete devotion). However, Krsna's will is divine and independent of any external pressures. Thus Krsna will bless whomever he wishes—it is not necessary that one who is always occupied with the performance of pious deeds will receive the Lord's blessings. Such an expectation is a reflection of egoism, and egoism is the cause of all ignorance. Moreover the state of *bhakti* itself is a result of compassion of Krsna. *Vatsalyabhava*—or devotion to Sri Krsna as if one were his parent is the chosen *bhaktibhava* of Vallabhacharya. Under Vitthalnath this theology was expanded to give greater importance to the figure of Radha. After Vitthalnath's death in 1586—*svarupas* of Krsna were given to each of his seven sons. These seven 'branches' of Pushtimarg are known as Gaddis. Each of the latter also had the right to initiate new devotees with the *brahmasambandha* mantra. There was no single centralizing authority under which these seven centers functioned. Descendants of Vitthalnath are known as Maharajas. The buildings in which the deities reside are known as *havelis*.

The Gaudiya Sampraday is so named as some of its main theologians belong to Gauda region of Bengal. Caitanya born in 1486 was the tenth child of Jagannath Misra and his wife Sachi—a Brahmin family in Bengal. According to legend his birth took place during a full moon eclipse—an auspicious sign. His earlier name was Visvambhar Misra. His childhood home was Navadwip- a centre of Sanskrit learning. Here Caitanya gained mastery over the language and soon joined the teaching profession. When he was around 14-15 years, Caitanya married. (Caitanya's father-in-law's name was Vallabha. As a result a misperception has developed that the Vaisnav Vallabhacharya was related to Caitanya as his father -in-law. However, from all accounts it is evident that this was not the case. Not only was Vallabhacharya a contemporary of Caitanya, but the latter's father -in-law was from Nadia, in Bengal.) However early in their married life, Caitanya's first wife died and he remarried- this time to Vishnupriya. In 1508, Caitanya went to Gaya in Bihar to perform *sraddha* rituals for his father. This was a turning point for something happened in that holy town which changed Caitanya's life forever. An important role was played in this transformation by Isvara Puri- a Vaisnav monk who had been known to Caitanya's family earlier. Isvara Puri gave Caitanya a mantra to initiate him into Krsna worship.

Caitanya's philosophy is known as *Achintyabhedabheda* ('incomprehensible dualistic monism'). While the human soul is recognized as a part of the Supreme, but at the same time, it is also separate and distinct. Caitanya did not write anything himself except for a small poem of eight slokas called the Siksastakam. The basic scriptures of the sect were composed, in Sanskrit, by the Six Goswamins based in Vrindavan. Of these, Rup Goswami was the most instrumental in formulating the theology of the Gaudiyas. According to him, there are sixty four principles that one needs to follow to become a Vaisnav. However, of these, five are considered to be the most effective. These include: chanting Krsna's name (*nama*); remembering Krsna's exploits in the Bhagvat Purana(*smarana*); serving Krsna's image in the temple (*puja*); association with holy men and residence in Mathura- the holy land. The first injunction motivates one to follow the rest. Jiva Goswami —another preceptor —has stated that one can attain salvation through *kirtan*, that is, through the chanting of God's name. In fact *kirtan* is a general term for any singing of Gods praise. However it was the *Namkirtan* or the recitation of the various names of the God in a song form which became the selected practice by Caitanya. This required no special ritual space or any special time or state of purity and contributed to the popularity of the movement.

Further, Rup Goswami also made use of the classical Indian theory of poetics (the *rasa* theory), He classified the emotional relationship between God and man into five types, namely *santa* (awe which induces a kind of tranquility), *dasya* (servitude), *sakhyabhava* (friendship), *vatsalya* (a nurturing relationship such as that between a parent and child), and *srngara* (erotic love). Each *bhava* shares the quality of the preceding and adds further to it. Thus, according to the Gaudiyas, it is *srngara bhava* which is the most complete form of love for Krsna. It is the relationship between Radha and Krsna which is the source of *srngara bhava*. According to Alan Entwistle Radha's emergence as the foremost of Gopis was the most significant development in Krishna mythology since the end of the first millennium. Although the Bhagvatpuran does mention a favourite Gopi of Krishna, it does not mention Radha. Even in Alvar poetry, there is no reference to Radha. Instead Nappinai- a milkmaid is portrayed as participating in the *rasa* with Krsna. While the first mention of Radha is found in the Prakrit work *Gahasattasai* attributed to Hala it is basically in the Gitagovind that Radha's preeminence is established.

The nature of relationship between Krsna and the Gopis was an important issue for the thinkers of the sect. There were in fact two opposing viewpoints. While on the one hand there were those who argued that the Gopis and Radha were his wives (*svakiya*), others argued that they belonged to other men and were *parakiya*. That the issue was never completely decided is evident from the fact that even in the works of Rup Goswami, we find different versions. Another view held by passionate devotees who wrote in Bengali became an expression of the growing devotion for Caitanya himself. According to this group, in Caitanya were embodied both Krsna and Radha. The point was to allow Krsna to experience the love of Radha— as her experience of love was the most genuine since it was for Krsna. Krsna himself had been unable to savor this experience and so Caitanya took birth as the united form of Radha and Krsna to allow him to do so. There were other strands too which emerged in the course of the development of the sect. One group led by poets such as Narahari Sarkar, and Lochan Das practiced a much more personal form of worship, in which Caitanya was regarded as a divinity in his own right. Other prominent members of the sect included Nityananda, Haridasa (originally a Muslim). Nityananda became the mainstay of the sect in Navadvip.

IV CONCLUSION

An understanding of the religious landscape of Northern India at this point would help us to put our study of the two sects in better perspective. One of the main centres of Vaisnav resurgence in this period was Braj. "Braj" was not an officially recognized designation for a specific territory. It encompassed the modern day districts of Mathura and Bharatpur and neighbouring parts of other districts including Aligarh, Hathras, Agra and Alwar. In 1580, the region became part of the suba of Agra and consisted of the sarkars of Agra, Koil (Aligarh), and Sahar. About 18 *parganas* are reported to have constituted the Braj territory. This organization, with only a few minor changes, continued throughout the Mughal period. A major sphere in which the rivalry between the Gaudiyas and the Vallabhites was played out had to do with the representation of the recovery of the sacredness of Braj. In Vaisnav sectarian literature, it is held that all the *lila sthalas* or places where Krishna performed his *lila* were lost prior to the advent of the great masters. The reason given is the arrival of the Turks. Charlotte Vaudeville however argues that such a legend was popularized primarily to sanctify the history of the region. It is true that Vaisnav Puranas contain description of the holy sites of Braj. However, while these Puranas were composed over a wide period of time, none of the sections on Braj were composed prior to the sixteenth century. In these Puranas, one finds Braj described in terms of twelve *vanas* or forests.

Vaudeville argues that the only conclusion one can arrive at after a consideration of the relevant sources is that Braj was not a major centre of Krishna worship prior to the advent of Caitanya, Vallabha and other saints. Thus what occurred was not recovery or reclamation, but rather creation of Braj as the epicenter of Krsna worship. In the Vallabhite *vartas*, we come across several references in which Vallabh is shown responsible for the reclamation of Braj. Thus in the *varta* of Sadu Pande, Krishna himself appears in a dream to Vallabh and tells him about his emergence in Govardhan. Similarly in the Caitanyacaritamrta, Gaudiya theologians are shown as being instrumental in the retrieval of the *lila sthalas*. In fact Caitanya deputed two of his most prominent theologians, Rup and Sanatan Goswami to locate and rescue the holy spots. One of the ways in which resources were sought to be accumulated was through *yatras* or pilgrimages which were often undertaken by the founders themselves and which later became the established pilgrimage within the sect. Consequently, in both Vallabhite and Gaudiya literature, we find that often the account of activities is structured in terms of *yatras*. The one basic difference between the devotional natures of the two sects was that while the Vallabhites were practitioners of the *vatsalya bhava*, the Caitanyites' preferred mode of worship was *srngara bhava*. As both sects were Vaishnavite, the differences in the doctrinal positions could not have been radical. And yet disagreements did occur.

Thus one of the causes for the dispute over the Govardhannath temple between the Gaudiyas and the Vallabhites was the Gaudiya practice of worshipping Radha alongside Krishna. At a broader level, as Paul Toomey has pointed out while the Vallabhite outlook was structured around the family, the Caitanyites framed their experiences around a relationship that “violated” the family order. Although this interpretation was challenged by members of the Gaudiya sect at some point, nevertheless, it was the role of Radha as the lover, rather than as wife (as some argued she was), which came to be extolled. This was because love which defied all social conventions was considered to be the purest. On the other hand, the preservation of the family structure was important to the Vallabhite schema. A majority of their members belonged to god fearing prosperous mercantile classes who were uncomfortable with the figure of Radha. To an extent, this arrangement was sought to be modified by Vallabh’s son Vitthala, possibly as a result of Gaudiya influence. Despite such efforts, Radha was not able to gain the kind of importance she enjoyed among the Gaudiya devotees, in the Vallabha sect. The particular theologies formulated by each sect, emphasized a number of devotional practices, which taken to their logical end would have led to tensions. The specific provision for worship of images required that each sect appropriate these sacred symbols. The injunction to associate with fellow devotees was a powerful impulse behind the creation of formal communities. Similarly the instruction to settle in the Braj area fuelled attempts to establish connections between each of the sects and Braj. This was reflected in the competition for land grants that occurred in this period. Mughal patronage of Vaisnavite temples, especially in Vrindavan has been documented. However the Mughal state was not the only political entity which patronized the sects. As Monika Horstmann has argued, in the context of the disintegration of the Mughal empire and the emergence of successor states, a Vaisnava oriented stance reinforced by Vedic rituals was utilized by rulers to legitimize the cosmic and political claims of a Hindu prince to universal rule. Thus the Govinddeva temple received many grants from the Kacchwaha dynasty of Amber while the Srinathji temple was supported by grants from the Sisodias. This paper has sought to recover this very competition between two ostensibly similar texts by analyzing the doctrinal differences between the two.

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