

SIMILES AND EXAMPLES IN THE EXPLANATION OF KARMAYOGA IN THE JNANESHWARI BY SANT JNANESHWAR

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Abstract

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is the glorious dialogue between Arjuna and Sri Krishna containing the essence of the Vedic philosophy in nutshell and in the most lucid form. There have been thousands of commentaries on Bhagavad Gita and many different interpretations are also available from ancient to the medieval period. Each scholar has interpreted it according to the main philosophical precept of his/her School of thought, while other interpretations were also possible. However the commentary in Marathi, the regional language by Sant Jnaneshwar is unique. He as a Yogi, a Poet, a Bhakta and a Jnani of the Nath Vaishnava tradition (Sampradaya), Varkari (Vithoba-Krishna) Bhakti movement tradition and disciple of his own elder brother and guru Nivvrutthinath. Jnaneshwar gifted us a precious work which is the commentary on Shrimad Bhagawad Gita, titled Bhavarthdeepika in Marathi and also known as Jnaneshwari and Shri Dnyaneshwari. What is unique in Jnaneshwari is that it is written keeping in mind a common man and not an elite class of that time. That is the reason why it is written in Marathi, a regional language and filled with many examples and similes that a common would easily understand. Many people also believe that it was Lord Krishna Himself, who reincarnated to make the Gita available to everyone. This present study is a humble attempt to find and present all these similes and examples that are used allegorically by Jnaneshwar to simplify the message conveyed by lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. The study is delimited to the Karmayoga only and hence, the researcher has compiled the verses dealing with the Karmayoga, particularly in third to sixth chapters.

Keywords: Karmayoga, Jnaneshwar, Gita, Moksha, Jnanyoga, Jnaneshwari, Jnandev, Dnyaneshwari, Dnyaneshwar, Dnyandev, Mauli Bhavarthdeepika, Rendition of Gita, Commentary on Gita

INTRODUCTION

Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita, is revered as one among the exalted triad of the fundamental philosophical texts (Prasthanatrayi) of the Sanatana Dharma; the other two being the principal Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra which is the condensed essence of Upanishads. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is the glorious dialogue between Arjuna and Sri Krishna and aptly described as Jnanamaya Pradipa- the Light of Knowledge. It embodies the essence of the Vedic philosophy in nutshell and in the most popular form.

Sant Jnaneshwar, also known as Shri Jnandev, Dhnaneshwar, Dnyandeva and Jnanoba (1275-1296), was a Yogi, a Poet, a Bhakta and a Jnani of the Nath Vaishnava tradition (Sampradaya), Varkari (Vithoba-Krishna) Bhakti movement tradition and disciple of his own elder brother and guru Nivvrutthinath. Jnaneshwar was one of the four children of Rukmini Bai and Vitthalpant Kulkarni. He, in the span of just twenty-one years of short life gifted us a precious work which is the rendition, scholium or commentary on Shrimad Bhagawad Gita, titled Bhavarthdeepika in Marathi and also known as Jnaneshwari and Shri Dnyaneshwari. He had a vision of that Light at a very young age and he, through the Jnaneshwari, brought to light the deeper meaning and hidden significance of the dialogue between the Shri Krishna and Arjuna. Jnaneshwari is one of the oldest surviving literary works in Marathi language and considered as a milestone in Marathi Literature. However, after being translated in other Indian and foreign languages, it has secured its own place as one of the best commentaries on Gita. This treatise is widely recognised as the most authentic since it is believed by many of the followers that Lord Krishna Himself

reincarnated as Shri Dhnaneshwar, specifically to take the Bhagvad Gita philosophy to the common man. This belief gets strengthened by the fact that Shri Dhnaneshwar entered into live *Samadhi* soon after he completed this commentary on Gita at the tender age of just 21 years.

There have been thousands of commentaries on Bhagavad Gita and many different interpretations are also available from ancient to the medieval period. The medieval period starting with Sri Sankara (8th century) followed by the Bhashyas of Sri Ramanuja, Sri Madhwa and other Acharyas as also that of Abhinavagupta analyzed and commented upon the Gita in terms of the traditional Vedanta concepts of Advaita, Visistadavaita and Dvaita; and assigned primacy either to Jnana (knowledge) or to Bhakti (devotion) or to Karma (action). Each scholar went according to the main philosophical precept of his School of thought, while sidelining the other plausible interpretations. Each scholar went according to the principal philosophical precept of his School of thought, while sidelining the other plausible interpretations. Pundit Raghunath Madhav Bhagade notes in his Hindi translation of Jnaneshwari, “The Jnaneshwari is fascinating. It is as sweet as Shrimad Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit and as sweet as Ramayana in Hindi by Tulsidas.” (Bhagade. R., 2007, 01)

However the commentary of Gita by Sant Jnaneshwar is unique. What is unique in Jnaneshwari is that it is written keeping in mind a common man and not an intellectually elite class of that time. That is the reason why it is written in Marathi, a regional language and filled with many similes and examples that a common man would easily understand. It is aptly noted by Dr. Arunaba Jadeja that Jnaneshwari feeds us like a loving mother who keeps on feeding her child with the food of his taste saying, “Son, don’t you like this? Try this and if you don’t like this, try this.” Jnaneshwari too, keeps on giving more and more examples using simile until we understand the sense completely. (Jadeja, A. 2019, 40-41). In some of the explanations we the number of similes reach more than twenty similes. This is the reason why she notes that Kalidasa is admired for Similes in Sanskrit literature, but in Santsahitya, i.e. spiritual literature of saints, nobody can compete the simile of Jnaneshwara. “उपमा ज्ञानेश्वरस्य” (*upama jnaneshwarasya*) (ibid. 40).

In this research, the researcher has made a humble attempt to find and present all these similes and examples that are used allegorically by Jnaneshwar to simplify the message conveyed by lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. These similes and example are available throughout the 9032 Ovees (rhythmic prose or verse) of Jnaneshwari, but study is delimited to the Karmayoga only and hence, the researcher has compiled the verses dealing with the Karmayoga, which are mostly from third to sixth chapters.

The Similes and Examples in Jnaneshwari:

It is observed that in Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Shri Krishna begins with Sankhyayoga in second chapter (Adhyaya), and then introduces Karmayoga and then Bhaktiyoga. Second chapter deals with Sankhyayoga, which provides knowledge of the self and shows the jyanmarga or path of salvation. Third chapter is devoted to Karmayoga and shows the path of Karma to obtain salvation. Since the researcher is dealing with Karmayoga only in this research, an attempt is made to compile all the verses that deal with the message of Gita pertaining to Karmayoga. Total 22 verses are identified as preaching Karmayoga, in the rendition of which Jnaneshwari has used various examples to explain the complex abstract knowledge in an easy way. It is observed that forty seven original examples are used by Sant Jnaneshwar to explain what the Gita wants to convey in these 22 verses. Out of these 22 selected verses, 12 verses belong to the third chapter, five verses belong to fourth chapter, four verses belong to fifth chapter and one verse belongs to sixth chapter. All the examples are from the day to day life and belong to the periphery of the routine experience of every common man. It is due to these examples that the difficult terms and concepts become too easy and are understood thoroughly.

• Jnyayoga and Karmayoga are the Same

The abstract concepts of Karma and Jnana are explained with easy examples are similes of day to day life here. In the third verse of the third chapter of Gita, Krishna says “*loke ’smin dvi-vidhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayānagha, jñāna-yogena sāṅkhyānām karma-yogena yoginām*”. In this verse, Krishna introduces two paths leading to enlightenment which were previously explained by him: the path of knowledge, for those inclined toward contemplation, and the path of work or action for those inclined toward action. While explaining this verse, and particularly the similarity between the Jyana and Karma, as expressed in third verse of third Chapter, which are apparently different but are in fact one and the same, Jnaneshwar gives three different and interesting examples. First is that of ready-made meal and the meal that is yet to be prepared (*jasi siddhsadhya bhojani, trupti eka, Jnaneshwari: 3.39*). He easily makes the reader understand that the objective of the both is that of satisfying hunger. Thus, with the example of food, Jnaneshwar easily makes it clear that both these ways lead to one destination. Furthermore, in the explanation of the same verse, he also gives the example of two rivers that are appearing to flow in different directions, let’s say one flows towards the Western and Eastern directions, ultimately meet when they merge into the ocean. (*kam purvapapar saritam ...maga sindhu malani ekyata, Jnaneshwari 3.39*) In the same way both the ways of life lead to Liberation or the emancipating vision. They differ only in the manner in which they are put into action. The followers of these paths select it on the basis of their respective capacities. The third example is that of a bird. He explains that a bird, with a single flight, can reach a fruit on the tree but a man cannot take a flight like that bird and reach the fruit. (*pakshi falansi zomben jaisa*

jnaneshwari, Jnaneshwari: 3.41) He would go gradually from one branch to another, follow a suitable course and ultimately reach the fruit in due time. In the same way, adopting the bird's method, the people following Sankhyoga follow the path of knowledge, and attain Liberation with a sweep and those who follow the path of Karmayoga, i.e. path of action or duty, perform actions and in due course reaching the stage of the attainment of perfect knowledge attains Liberation.

- **All Actions Cease with Eternal Contentment:**

In the fourth verse of third chapter, it is said that one cannot achieve freedom from karmic reactions by merely nonparticipating or abstaining from work, nor can one attain perfection of knowledge by mere physical renunciation. In the rendition of this verse, Jnandevji gives an example of a situation and says that it would not be a wise thing to abandon a boat when one has to cross a flooded river. To explain it furthermore, he gives one simpler example. He says that when a person is willing to satisfy his hunger, will he not prepare any food himself or will he not take the food which is already prepared? Thus, he explains with these examples that so long as the desires have not been allayed the bondage of action continues. All actions, however, cease as soon as one attains the state of eternal contentment. So, one wishing for "action-free status" must not abandon the duties prescribed by his religion. Besides it is a vain and silly talk to say that actions performed according to one's choice or need do succeed, and those abandoned disappear. Just consider and get this point cleared, but bear this thing in mind definitely, that one cannot escape from actions merely by abandoning them.

- **Actionlessness is not Possible:**

Is it possible to remain without any action? This question is answered with many examples. In the fifth verse of the third chapter, it is said that there is no one who can remain without action even for a moment. Indeed, all beings are compelled to act by their qualities born of material nature (the three *gunas*: Satva, Rajas and Tamas). To explain this, Jnandev gives an example and says, even if one were to sit motionless in a chariot, still he has got to be moving along with the chariot, being dependent on the chariot. To explain it more clearly he gives another example of a dried up leaf that gets blown away by wind, and continues to float in the sky-cavity even though it is lifeless. He thus clarifies that in the case of human beings too, actions continue to be done automatically under the influence of Maya and of the organs of action, even in the so called "action-free status." Therefore, abandonment of Karma cannot be effected so long as there is the influence of Maya. In spite of this, those that say they can relinquish (Karma) are simply perversely obstinate. The allegory of chariot and dried up leaf being blown up in wind makes it easy to understand the complexities of action less state of being.

- **Anasakt Karma:**

In the seventh verse of third chapter, it is said that those karmyogis who control their knowledge senses (eyes, ears, touch, taste and smell) with the mind and engage the working senses in working without attachment, are certainly superior. In order to explain this state of being, Jnandev gives an example of a lotus leaf which remains untouched by water even if it floats on water. Just as a floating lotus-leaf never gets wet with the water, he remains untainted in the tangle of worldly affairs and appears like others and never becomes a victim to desires nor does he get himself soiled by the filth of infatuation. One more example makes it even clear that just as the reflection of the Sun creates an illusion that the Sun is there in the water, like all other things on the earth, even though the Sun himself does not really exist there, similarly, to a common observer he (the *anasakta*) appears just like an ordinary person, but no one succeeds in finding out his real attitude. So, with the examples of a lotus leaf and the reflection of the Sun, it is made clear that the person who is endowed with such aspects should alone be considered to be emancipated from the fetters of hopes and expectations.

- **Selfless obedience of Duties:**

Some practical examples from day to day life are given here. In the tenth verse of the third chapter, it is said that in the beginning of creation, Brahma created humankind along with duties, and said, "Prosper in the performance of these *yajñas* (sacrifices), for they shall bestow upon you all you wish to achieve." Explaining this, Jnandevji gives an example of a devoted wife who serves her husband selflessly and devotedly: in the same way to follow your own duties as the only sacrificial service is the only duty you have to do. One more example to explain this is that of *Kamdhenu*. He says, if you follow your own religion with devotion, it will be proved as a *Kamdhenu*, and will never renounce you leaving you helpless.

- **Devotion and Selflessness:**

We find four different similes in the twelfth verse of the third chapter. It is said here that the celestial gods, being satisfied by the performance of sacrifice, will grant you all the desired necessities of life. But those who enjoy what is given to them, without making offerings in return, are verily thieves. If this verse is not understood properly and a superficial meaning is taken, it may mislead to some superstitious conclusions. But Jnandevji explains it with four different examples and clarifies its hidden sense. He compares the selfish person, who does not think of offerings in return, with the body without the spirit, body of a person whose span of life is over. Such a person does not remain in a position to enjoy the pleasures he secured. He explains further with an example of the goddess of wealth who does not dwell in the house of an unlucky person, in the same way, the very fount of happiness gets dried up where one's own religion in the prescribed, sacrificial form ceases to exist in the way light disappears with the extinguishing of a lamp. Thus, he who abandons his own religion will be punished by the

all consuming destroyer (Kal) and will be deprived of all his possessions, being taken as a thief. Like ghosts mustering on a cemetery, he will then be enveloped by all his sins and all the miseries in the universe and whatever other calamities there exist. One more example of the fish living in water that meet instantaneous death as soon as they get out of water explains is clearly how one leaving one's own religion is utterly annihilated.

- **Slaves of Senses are like Unseasonal Clouds:**

The simile of Unseasonal Clouds is used in many ways in Jnaneshwari. In the sixteenth verse of the third chapter, it is said that those who do not accept their responsibility in the cycle of sacrifice established by the Vedas are sinful. They live only for the delight of their senses; indeed their lives are in vain. This thought is explained with an example of unseasonal clouds and said that those who live only for the delight of their senses and who turns away from the path of his own religious sacrifices, their existence is as barren as the unseasonal clouds overspreading the sky and they lead a life of utter futility which is as worthless as the fleshy nipples hanging down from the neck of goats (*Ajagalastana*). These examples of such futile things very clearly make it clear why one should not forsake his own religion.

- **Be an Example for Others:**

In the twentieth and twenty first verse of the third chapter, it is said that by performing their prescribed duties, King Janaka and others attained perfection. Arjuna (and we all) should also perform his (our) work to set an example for the good of the world. Whatever actions great persons perform, common people follow. Whatever standards they set, all the world pursues. This message is explained with the example of a man with eyes wide open who slowly walks ahead along the road being followed by the blind. The way a man with good vision helps a blind person to walk through the road, in the same way the wise men should take the ignorant along with them and teach them their religion. How aptly the *Shreshtha* (great persons) and *Itarejana* (common people) are compared with those who can see and those having no eyes. Such concrete examples contribute greatly in explaining the real sense of the wonderful message conveyed in Gita.

- **No Action or Good Actions:**

In the twenty sixth verse of the third chapter, it is said that the wise should not create conflict in the intellects of ignorant people, who are attached to actions, by inducing them to stop work. Rather, by performing their duties in an enlightened manner, they should inspire the ignorant also to do their prescribed duties. Jnandev explains this verse with an example of a child which can suck (the mother's) breast with great difficulty. The way such a child cannot take heavy food, those that have strength just enough to perform actions, should not even in a sporting manner be asked to be action-less. They should be led to do good things, the value of good actions should be praised before them, and they should be given models of disinterested actions, by the learned ones in their own conduct. In the same verse, one more example of an actor (*Bahurupi*) is also interesting. A detached wise person who performs actions for the preservation of the social order (*Loksangraha*) is not entangled by such actions in any way, just as an actor (*bahurupi*). Though the actor plays the parts both of the king and the queen, he does not, for the time being, carry in his own mind any notion of being either a male or a female, but only entertains the spectators.

- **Action with Detachment or Disengagement:**

The Sun, though lights the whole world and still remains detached, is just like a person performing all actions without any attachment. In the twenty eighth verse of the third chapter, the above fact is explained saying that illumined persons distinguish the soul as distinct from *gunas* and *karmas*. They perceive that it is only the *gunas* (the senses, mind, etc.) that move amongst the *gunas* (the objects of perception), and thus they do not get entangled in them. Jnandeva explains this with the example of the Sun. Though the Sun spreads light on the earth, he, in no way gets himself affected by any affairs of the world, which are carried on in the light he sheds. Thus, though the detached persons exist in human forms, they do not get themselves bound by actions.

- **Darkness of Ignorance:**

The useless efforts to teach a fool are explained using the simile of jewels worn by a corpse in the thirty second verse of the third chapter. Here, it is said that those who under the grip of delusive *Maya* give themselves up to indulgence to the senses, and turn away from my (Shri Krishna's) teaching or treat it lightly looking at it with a contemptuous eye as idle talk, out of sheer impudence, are evil souls that are intoxicated with the drink of wine in the form of infatuation, poisoned with sense-objects, and stuck up in the darkness of ignorance. This is more explained with the example of the fools, who cannot appreciate the teaching of the Yoga of actions, just as jewels placed in the hands of a corpse are wasted, or just as the blind cannot enjoy morning light, or just as moon-light is of no use to a crow. The fools, therefore, do not heed it (teaching) but, on the contrary, ridicule it and this is but natural, as a moth cannot bear the lamp-light. It goes to embrace the flame that consumes it: in the same way the enjoyment of the sense-objects is self-destruction to such fools. So, such ones should not even be talked to as they get wearied with thoughts on spiritual matters.

- **We Reap Whatever We Sow:**

In the fourth chapter, twelfth verse tells that in this world, those desiring success in material activities worship the celestial gods, since material rewards manifest quickly. This fact is explained by the example of the fertile land. Whatever is sown in the land is to be reaped as fruit, not anything else, or whatever is held before the mirror is

alone reflected in it; or whatever is uttered; sitting at the bottom-base-of a mountain (or a cave) is only reverberated or echoed. Thus, with the help of multiple examples, it is nicely explained that the fruit secured is just according to the measure of desires of the seekers.

- **Burnt Seed Can Never Germinate:**

Motiveless actions and burnt seeds have the same attributes as they both don't germinate. This simile is used in the next verse. In the fifteenth verse of the fourth chapter, it is said that knowing this truth, even seekers of liberation in ancient times performed actions. Therefore, you too should perform your duty following the footsteps of those ancient sages. This message is made understood by the example of the *burnt seed that can never germinate*. Motiveless actions are also free from attachment become the cause of their emancipation.

- **What is action and Inaction:**

What is action and what is inaction is explained by an example of a fake coin in the sixteenth verse of the fourth chapter. Even the wise are confused in determining action and inaction. Shri Krishna then says that he will explain to Arjuna the secret of action, by knowing which, he may free himself from material bondage. How even the wise people are confused is explained with an example of a counterfeit or fake coin that looks exactly like a genuine one, and makes a person the victim of erroneous perception of the eyes. The actions and inactions are also mistaken and confused in the same manner.

- **Action in Inaction and Inaction in Action:**

The simile of reflection in water is used in the eighteenth verse of the fourth chapter to describe detachment. Here, it is said that those who see action in inaction and inaction in action are truly wise amongst humans. Although performing all kinds of actions, they are yogis and masters of all their actions. This is explained by saying that just as one standing near water, sees his own reflection in it, yet fully knows that he is not that (reflection) one, but that he is separate from it; or just as one enjoying boating in a river, sees (as if) the trees on the bank (and not the boat itself) are running, yet after reflection realizes that the trees are stationary; in the same way one who views his actions as unreal considered from the point of view of the form of the Self, and realizes the original form of his own Self is a real action-free person. It is further explained that the Sun appears, while rising and setting, wending his way without (actually) moving in any way; similar is the action-freeness of the one (perfect in knowledge) even though he is seen performing actions.

- **Freedom from Material Attachments:**

Clouds out of season, that never rain, are very aptly compared with actions without attachment in the twenty third verse of the fourth chapter. Those who perform all actions without any attachment are released from the bondage of material attachments and their intellect is established in divine knowledge. Since they perform all actions as a sacrifice (to God), they are freed from all karmic reactions. This is explained with the example of clouds. Just as clouds arising in the sky out of season, evaporate of themselves without any downpour; in the same way the religious sacrifices and other duties performed by him prescribed by Vadas, lose themselves in his absolute unitary spirit.

- **Karmayoga is Equally Useful to All:**

In the second verse of the fifth chapter, it is explained that both the path of karm sanyās (renunciation of actions) and karm yog (working in devotion) lead to the supreme goal. But karm yog is superior to karm sanyās. See, how the example of a boat clarifies the message. A boat is useful for ferrying women and children across a stream. In the same way, karmayoga is equally useful for the knowledgeable and common people. Here Karmayoga and its usefulness is nicely explained with the example of a boat.

- **Jnanayoga and Karmayoga: Both lead to Salvation:**

In the fourth verse of the fifth chapter, Jnana and Karma are compared with a lamp. Using this simile, it is explained that renunciation (karm sanyās) is difficult to attain without performing work in devotion (karm yog), but the sage who is adept in karmyoga quickly attains the Supreme. This fact is explained with the example of a lamp. As a lamp doesn't shed a variety of lights, the two paths, Jnana and Karma are essentially one and the same in the vision of those who have realised the essence of the absolute Self.

- **Individual or Absolute:**

A very popular simile of a female elephant made of salt is used in the seventh verse of the fifth chapter. It is explained that the karmyogis, who are of purified intellect, and who control the mind and senses, see the Soul of all souls in every living being. Though performing all kinds of actions, they are never entangled. This is explained with an example of salt. As salt looks separate and a trifle shape, so long it has not fallen into the ocean, (*lavanbachi kunjari*) but once it drops into the sea and is one with it, it becomes as vast as the sea itself; in the same way one whose mind has freed itself from all cravings and desires and has merged with pure sentience, such a one becomes an absolute universal Presence, although looking like others an individual circumscribed by place, time and other limitations.

- **Lotus leaf in Water:**

The simile of a lotus leaf is again used to explain detachment in the tenth verse of the fifth chapter, it is said that those who dedicate their actions to God, abandoning all attachment, remain untouched by sin, just as a lotus leaf is untouched by water. This concept is explained with an additional example of a lamp. Just as all routine

household actions go on with the light of the lamp, in that way, the body's actions continue to be performed in the case of the Karmayogin. He performs all the actions, and yet, while performing them does not get plastered over by them, like the lotus leaf, which while dwelling in water, does not yet get wet or drenched with water. It is noteworthy that the example of the lotus

• **Action with no Expectation of the Result:**

One more verse in sixth chapter talks about the Karmayoga. In this verse, it is said that those who perform prescribed duties without desiring the results of their actions are actual sanyāsīs (renunciates) and yogis, not those who have merely ceased performing sacrifices such as agnihotra yajña or abandoned bodily activities. This verse indicates that there is no difference between the Yogin and Sansyasin. One may address the same person by different names, one may reach one's destination by two roads; or the same water may fill different pots; in that way the difference between "Yoga and Renunciation" is only nominal and not real. He is a Yogin, who performs actions and yet is not attached to the action-fruit. Jnandev explains further that the earth, out of her natural stuff, sprout trees and other plants without expecting any fruit or gain out of them. That is the way the Yogin performs action grounded in his Vision of Soul according to his own station in life and in good time and is also free from selfish love of his person and who does not permit any attachment for action fruit even to touch his mind- such a person alone should be taken as a Sanyasin, and he alone is a great Yogin in truth.

CONCLUSION:

Thus we can see how beautifully Jnaneshwar Maharaj explains some of the very difficult ideas and concepts using similes and examples to make it so easy that a common man can understand the essence of it. The examples used are from the day to day life and are quite familiar with us and so, everyone can quickly associate them with the message they convey. Jonathan Star rightly says,

"Breaking from tradition, Jnaneshwar not only translated the central Sanskrit text, the Bhagavad Gita, into the common language of Marathi but added a magnificent commentary which expounds the complete path of yoga and spiritual practice. His commentary, the Jnaneshwari, still stands among the greatest spiritual works ever written." (Star J. 2021)

This makes the Jnaneshwari one of the most important literary milestones in Marathi Literature. It is observed in one of the Gujarati translations of Jnaneshwari, "Jnaneshwari is not only the first among the Marathi literary works but also the best in quality." (Parmar R. & Amin G, 2016, 9)

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