

# Empowering Half the Sky: A Review on Women's Political Participation in India

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**Abstract:** *Women's participation in legislatures is not only indispensable for the success of democracy but also for the overall progress and development of society and nation. Women's empowerment and their representation in decision-making bodies are therefore considered basic and critical to every aspect of nation-building. The political empowerment of women stands as a critical pillar in the pursuit of gender equality and inclusive governance. In India, a nation marked by its rich cultural heritage and diverse socio-economic fabric, the journey towards women's political empowerment has been both intricate and multifaceted. This research paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the political landscape in India, with a particular focus on the empowerment of women within the realm of governance. Drawing upon a range of scholarly literature, empirical data, and case studies, this paper sheds light on the historical evolution, current status, and prospects of women's political participation in India. Key areas of analysis include the impact of electoral quotas, socio-cultural barriers, and institutional frameworks on women's access to political power. Additionally, the paper explores the role of grassroots movements, legal reforms, and affirmative action policies in fostering greater political representation for women. In conclusion, this research offers a comprehensive analysis of the political empowerment landscape for women in India, highlighting achievements, persistent challenges, and avenues for future progress.*

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Panchayat Raj Institution, Indian Democracy, Challenges, Political Participation.

## 1. Introduction

In the growth and development of parliamentary democracy in India, women have played a remarkably significant role. They have held crucial positions in both the legislature and the government, enriching these institutions with their diverse contributions. A closer look at their participation in the parliamentary sessions reveals the varied dimensions and the magnitude of their efforts. Women have not only brought attention to issues concerning the upliftment of women but have also addressed numerous other matters of national and international importance. Their contributions extend beyond the parliamentary sessions, as they have achieved notable milestones outside the legislative realm. The participation of women in public life was regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for improving the societal standing of women.

The inclusion of women in decision-making processes is vital to ensure that women's interests are integrated into governance. Experience has shown that governance structures lacking adequate female participation often result in state interventions that are neither inclusive nor democratic. Particularly in local governments, the inclusion of women is a crucial step toward creating equal gender opportunities and formulating policies that are sensitive to gender issues. Given that women possess distinct needs and perspectives on social and political matters, their government involvement is essential to encompass a wide range of societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes. Women, being actively engaged in household and community work, are aware of the real issues faced by the common people, providing them with valuable insights and perspectives instrumental for sustainable overall development.

In the realm of political economy literature, the 'citizen-candidate model' posits that the identity of politicians stands as a crucial factor influencing investment decisions (Osborne

& Silvinsky, 1996). Scholars, drawing from these models, have delved into exploring the distinct impact of politicians' gender on the policymaking process (e. g., Bardhan, Mookherjee, & Torrado, 2010; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). It is postulated that men and women possess divergent preferences, leading to distinct choices when entrusted with significant political responsibilities.

## 2. Understanding Political Empowerment of Women in India

Empowerment is a continuous process rooted in ideals of equality, liberalization, and freedom. The empowerment of women encompasses a multi-step process. (World Bank, 2001). Firstly, there is a need for a change in consciousness to alter their fate, marking a crucial aspect of transformation. The second step involves recognizing and having control over valuable resources, encompassing material, human, and social aspects within society. Additionally, women must unite to comprehend institutionalized injustice and actively address these issues. It is crucial to acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group; factors such as race, class, caste, and ethnicity contribute to further complexities in the struggle against injustice. (Kabeer, N., 2001)

In ancient India, women were highly respected. The Vedas and Upanishads elevated a woman to the status of a goddess. The Manusmriti regarded women as precious and esteemed beings, first by their father, then by their brother and husband, and ultimately by their son. However, post-Vedic, the practice of polygamy and patriarchy became a major factor affecting women negatively, with denial of rights and power. Traditional barriers damaged women's dignity, and even after the Mauryan Period, the situation worsened.

Indomitable personalities such as Razia Sultan, Rani Lakshmbai, Savitribai Phule, Ahilyabai Holkar, and others demonstrate women uniting as a formidable force, fearlessly fighting in wars. The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, emphasized the necessity of elevating women's status for achieving Swaraj. During the Salt Satyagraha, about 17, 000 ordinary women from various corners of India participated willingly, reflecting a growing consciousness of empowerment. In 1931, the Karachi Session of the Indian National Congress committed to political equality for women. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, and others played a crucial role in acknowledging and addressing the degraded position of Indian women. Annie Besant's leadership marked a significant phase (1911 - 18) in the Indian national movement, and the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and other regional organizations emerged to improve women's lives. The struggle for women's rights continued, leading to Indian women exercising their vote in the 1926 elections. Dr. Muttu Lakshmi Reddy's contributions in Madras were notable, and the India Act of 1935 allowed women to be elected and become administrators. Despite these advancements, a notable gap remained between the theoretical status and the actual rights of women in Indian society. (Khanday et al., 2015).

Following the enactment and adoption of the Constitution of free India on January 26, 1950, a new era unfolded for the vast population of the country. This period, especially for women, marked the commencement of progress. Begum Aizaz Rasul, a Member of the Council of States, expressed this sentiment during the 1952 debate on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address. She emphasized the Constitution's foundational principle of equality for every individual, regardless of gender, and highlighted the significant feature of granting women equal status and opportunities. The Constitution, through Article 326 and various Fundamental Rights provisions, ensured political equality for women, granting adult suffrage to Indian citizens aged 18 and above. These provisions, both positive and negative, signified a noteworthy beginning for women's political equality since the Constitution's adoption. This development not only challenged traditional socio - cultural norms but also stood out in comparison to other modern Western nations that achieved equal political rights for women after prolonged struggles. Apart from important acts, the following are the major two important decisions that uplifted the status of women in India.

#### a) Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill

The Women's Reservation Bill, formally known as The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, is a proposed legislation in India aimed at enhancing the representation of women in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. The primary objective of the bill is to address the gender disparity in elected bodies and promote women's participation in decision - making processes at the highest levels of governance. The provision for reserving 33% of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is a key feature of the Women's Reservation Bill. Within the 33% reservation, there is a provision for sub - quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This is intended to ensure that women from marginalized

communities also get adequate representation. The bill has faced resistance and opposition from some political quarters. The bill has been introduced in different forms since the mid - 1990s but has not been passed into law. It has faced multiple hurdles in the legislative process, including lapsing in the Parliament multiple times. (Nisha et al., 2018)

#### b) Panchayati Raj Institution

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India, established as part of decentralized governance, play a pivotal role in grassroots democracy. With a three - tier structure comprising Gram Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samitis at the block level, and Zilla Parishads at the district level, PRIs empower local communities in decision - making processes. A significant aspect of this system is the reservation of seats for women, ensuring their active participation. According to the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, one - third of the seats in Panchayats are reserved for women. This reservation has been instrumental in enhancing women's representation in local governance. As of the latest available data, women's participation in Panchayats has shown a positive trend. In the 2015 - 2020 term, women occupied 44.7% of the total elected seats in Panchayats, surpassing the mandated one - third reservation. This not only reflects the success of affirmative action but also signifies the growing role of women in shaping local policies and addressing community issues through the Panchayati Raj system. Despite these advancements, challenges such as social barriers and gender - based prejudices persist, emphasizing the need for continuous efforts to strengthen women's involvement in PRIs. Singh, V. (2014).

### 3. Challenges in Assessing Women's Political Participation

Evaluating women's involvement in politics based on voting percentages and legislative representation is relatively straightforward. However, the difficulty lies in accurately gauging their actual participation in decision - making processes. (Shanker, n. d.)

#### 1) Proxy Participation

Instances have shown that, due to reservation policies, certain women have been elected, but they often function merely as mouthpieces for their male family members. This suggests that the officially recorded women's participation might be higher on paper than what is genuinely occurring on the ground. Ongoing awareness programs and an increase in female education are addressing such issues, leading to a rise in women's active participation. Nevertheless, there is a pressing need to collect data at a more detailed level to identify instances where women serve as proxies.

#### 2) Assessing Decision - Making Initiatives

While quantitative data on women's political participation at the local level is accessible, qualitative data on their active engagement, including the utilization of decision - making capabilities provided to them, is not adequately quantified. Although legislative measures have facilitated their substantial presence in governance, their impactful contributions to the system are yet to be universally established. Information on their awareness of their rights and their application is still lacking. Efforts should be directed toward capturing women's performance in debates, their

initiatives in legislative actions, and their involvement in various facets of the democratic process.

**4. Conclusion**

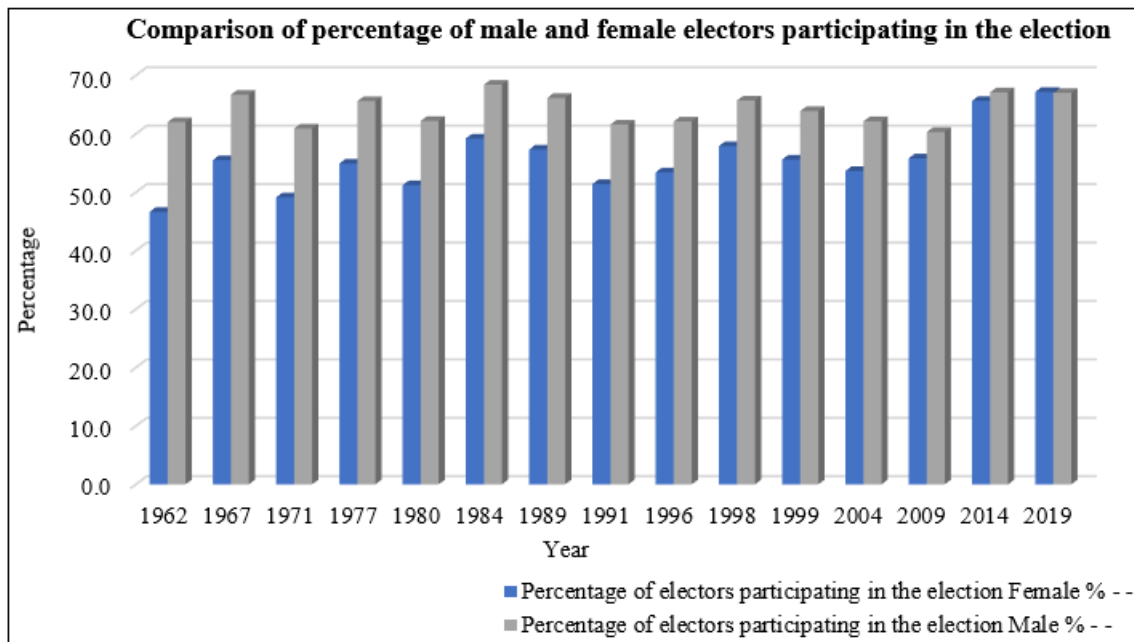
The increased participation of women in politics has yielded positive outcomes. Firstly, crucial development issues such as health, nutrition, family income, and education take precedence as women engage in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), village development boards, and other governance structures. Secondly, women have demonstrated a keen understanding of community resources, and proficient fund management, resulting in more inclusive governance. Despite these advancements, women continue to face exclusion from PRI and local governance structures. Proxy politics, power brokering, and gender discrimination persist, with instances of violence against women sarpanches challenging societal power centers. In some cases, women nominally hold positions in PRI, but male family members wield real power. Steps undertaken to increase women's participation in PRIs have not yielded the desired results (Fig.6). Women's participation is still less than 50 percent of the total voters (Figure 4). Massive interstate variation in women's participation in state assembly elections (Fig.3) manifests the need for state - specific policies to address this issue. Affirmative action in favor of marginalized communities has not eradicated exclusion based on caste, poverty, tribal status, and gender, creating a stark divide in political power. Urgent

steps are required from both the Central and State Governments to expedite the devolution of powers to PRI structures. The delay in this devolution, especially regarding funds, functions, and functionaries, hampers the Constitutional provisions and results in unclear operational situations. The lack of genuine devolution undermines the unique status of PRIs, hindering their effectiveness and causing setbacks to local political empowerment.

**5. Data and Discussions**

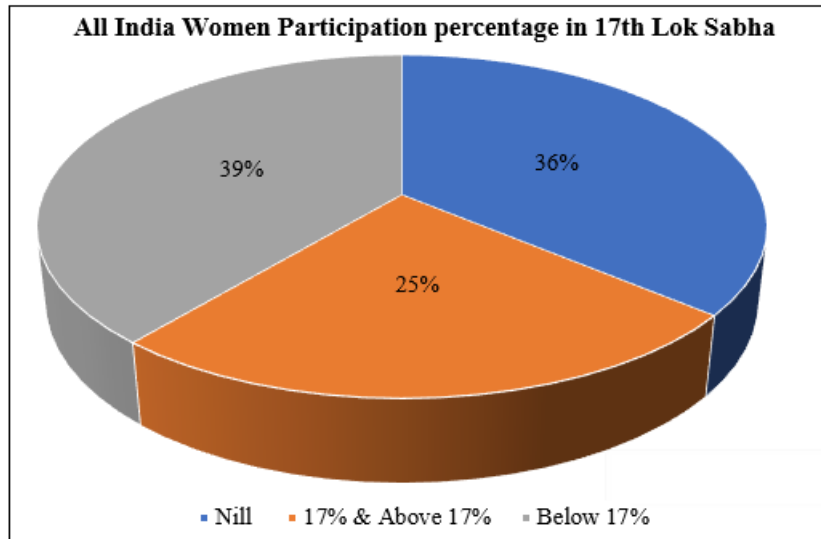
For this study, secondary data has been collected. According to the website of the Election Commission of India, the percentage of male and female electors participating in the election was obtained from 1962 to Dec 2019. It also gives us a bird's eye view perspective regarding State - wise participation of women in State Assemblies From the year 2014 to 2020, and the Participation of Women Electors in Polls (General Election 2019). The data collected from 1985 to 2020 gives a clear picture of the Percentage of Women in the Central Council of Ministers. From the website of the Lok Sabha Secretariat, the data for the All - India Women Participation percentage in the 17th Lok Sabha is collected. Reports published by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj represent the Status of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

**1) Comparison of the percentage of male and female electors participating in the election**



Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi

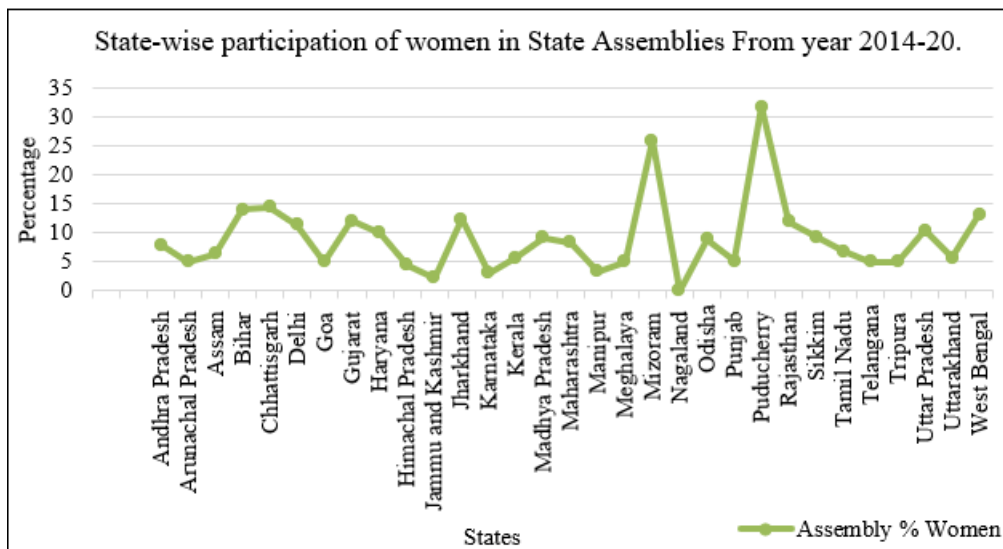
**2) All India Women Participation Percentage in 17th Lok Sabha**



Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat

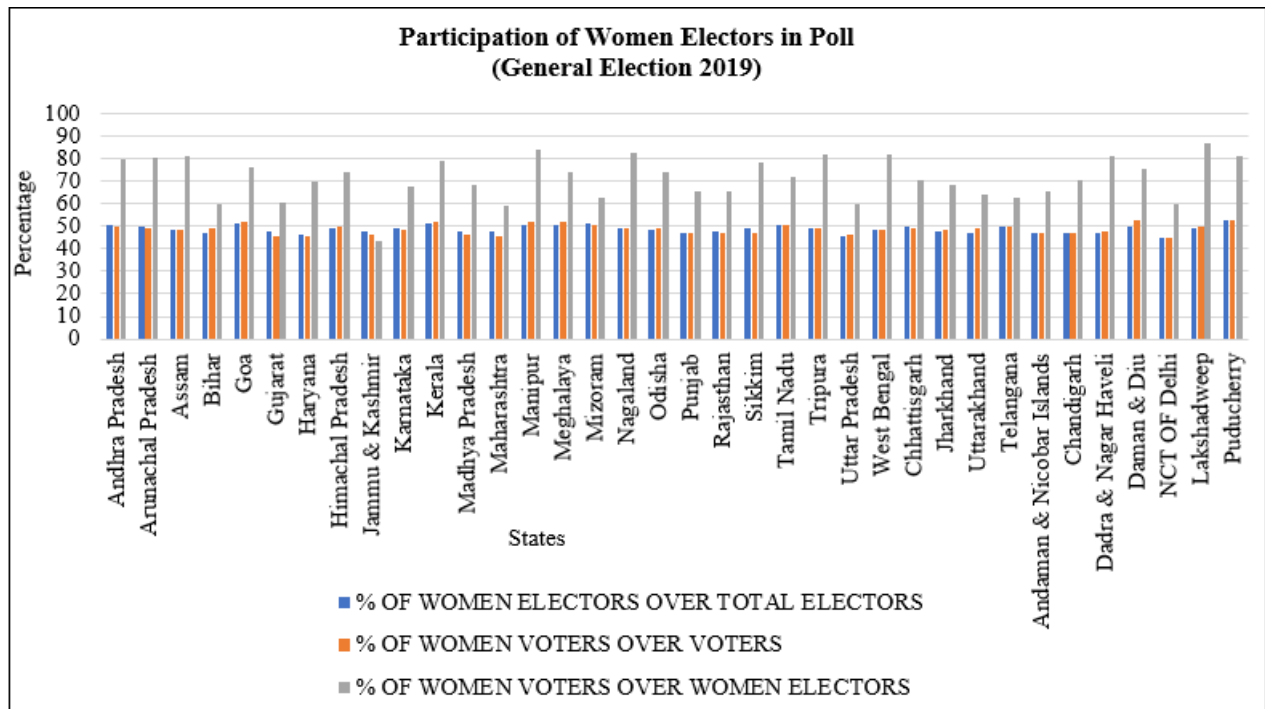
- a) **States having a Nil or 0% participation rate are as follows:**  
Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Dadar & Nagar Haveli, Daman & Diu, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Lakshadweep, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Puducherry, Sikkim.
- b) **States having 17% and above 17% participation rate are as follows:**  
Chandigarh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Odisha, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal.
- c) **States having below 17% participation rate are as follows:**  
Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh.

3) **State - wise participation of women in State Assemblies From the year 2014 - 20.**



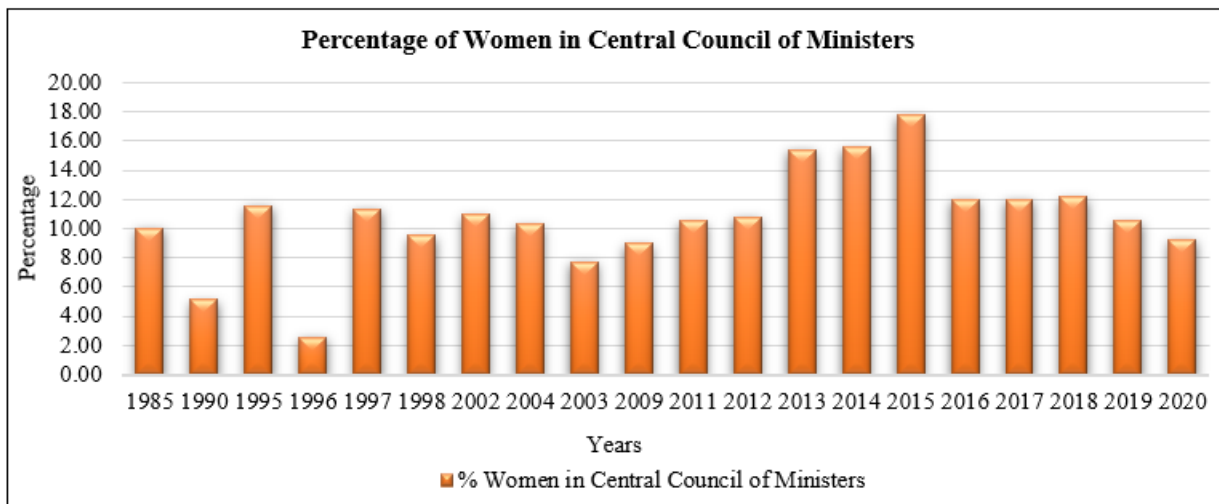
Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

4) **Participation of Women Electors in Poll (General Election 2019).**



Source: Election Commission of India.

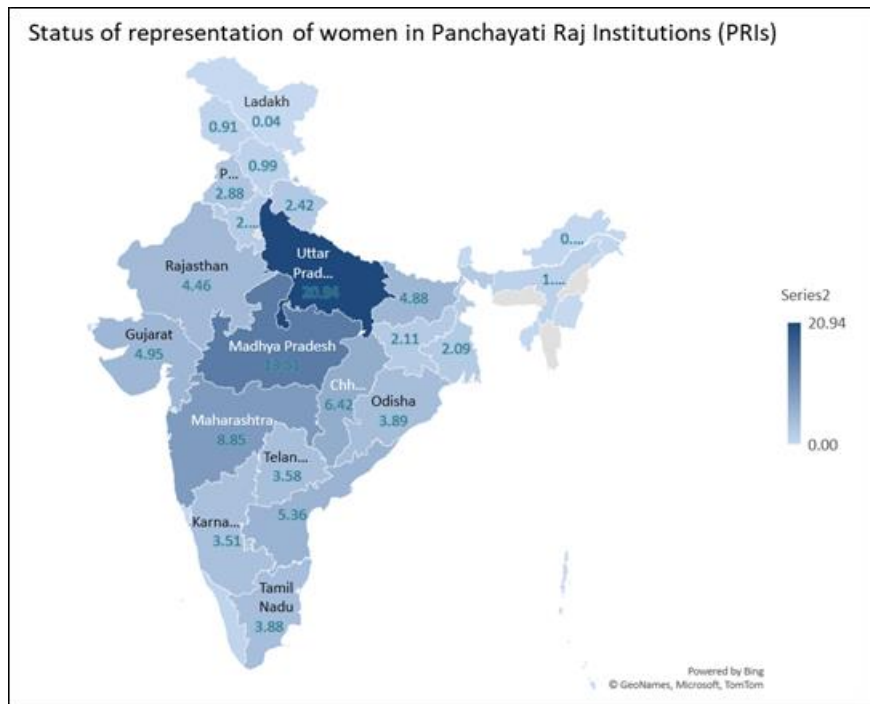
5) Percentage of Women in Central Council of Ministers



Source: Election Commission of India.

6) Status of representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) Source: Ministry of Pancha





Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj

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