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V.S. Naipaul's Hindu India and Concern with History in *India: A Wounded Civilization*

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Abstract: The paper will peruse 'Hindu India' and concerns with history through new-historicism in V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization*. He sees the oneness in India as a façade because of the collapse of dominance of Hindu culture in India. He mocks at various Gandhian ideals practiced in India, which according to him blur the vision of Indians as Gandhi built "only a nation of followers, with no leadership". Naipaul deals with India's social and cultural history as an extension of psycho-biographical experience of Indians. He associates Emergency with Indira Gandhi's name, but mainly attributes it to lack of "central will" in Hindus. History gets recreated largely through the individuals whose roles he reconstructs from interviews, fiction, non-fiction, newspaper clippings, and magazines for argumentation apart from his commentaries on the literature, society, and politics of India. In the light of his personal history and diasporic experience the paper will investigate his description of history vis-a-vis professional history.

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul, Hindu India, History, Culture, Society.

V.S. Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization* sees India's "going on" or "it's equilibrium" as a facade because of the collapse of dominance of Hindu culture in India. He observes India as a text to be studied and researched because of his expatriate experience and finds the 'Hindu India' as wounded, inflicted, and bruised due to invasions. Weiss comments on the 'wounds' as a metaphor which refers to a "psychic, not a physical wound: because of its particular religious and philosophic attitudes and its lack of a historical sense, India is unequipped to compete in the twentieth century" (124). Naipaul attempts to explore the reason not only of the Emergency but also of the general conditions of the country by working on India's intellectual and cultural history, because he knows;



“In the history books, in the accounts of wars and conquests and plunder, the intellectual depletion passes unnoticed” (IWC 8).

Naipaul, in this way, recuperates that history which; in general, does not become part of our history books and remains hidden. No doubt, he is not a professional historian recording the past, but he offers his own take on various issues which are part of our history. His is- what Nietzsche calls- *super-historical consciousness* in his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”- a sense that allows for a greater cultural view [emphasis added].

Naipaul jibes at a kind of collective amnesia widely prevalent in Indians’ perceptibility regarding their history. He is amused to find that Vijaynagar “as a kingdom, is so little remembered” (IWC 5) by the general Indian public.

Some of the ruins of Vijaynagar have been declared national monuments by the Archaeological Department; but to the pilgrims ... Vijaynagar is not its terrible history ... To the pilgrims Vijaynagar is its surviving temple (IWC 5).

Even those who claim to be part of the educated section of the country are equally disappointing. Naipaul is amazed to discover that “there are university students in Bangalore, two hundred miles away, who haven’t even heard of it” (IWC 5).

Naipaul is constrained to find that Indians have little *historic sense* [emphasis added]. He writes: “no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters” (IWC ix). For Indians, “India, Hindu India, is eternal: conquests and defilements are but instants in time” (IWC 4) and it “does seem just to go on” (IWC 3).

But Naipaul is appalled to find the same kind of ignorance- which is visible in the historic sense of Indians- about their present knowledge of Indian polity. He observes that “for the prince with his ancestral pieties, the girl with her foreign marriage, the peasant of Bihar or Bundi with his knowledge of karma, *India was going on: the Hindu equilibrium still held* [emphasis added] (IWC 27). All of them are far removed from the Emergency.

Naipaul also sees the Emergency in India as the beginning of the loss of an old equilibrium.

With independence and growth, chaos and a loss of faith, India was awakening to its distress and the cruelties that had always lain below its apparent stability, its capacity simply for



going on. Not everyone now was content simply to have his being. *The old equilibrium had gone, and at the moment all was chaos* [emphasis added] (IWC 38).

Though "... independent India, with its five-year plans, its industrialization, its practice of democracy, has invested in change" (IWC 8), yet this change could not be effective because India could not break off completely with its past. It does not mean that Naipaul endorses a complete break away from its past. He rather insists on the need for possessing the past but "only by inquiry and scholarship," by "intellectual discipline" (IWC 161) instead of a historical version mystified and born out of glorification.

Nietzsche talks of historical over-awareness, placing heavy burden on self-consciousness of individuals, denuding life of originality and creativity. On the contrary, Naipaul talks of the reverse for the colonized people. Historical amnesia, only a dim awareness of the past impedes the development of a healthy self-consciousness. It leads them to a halfway point somewhere between a repression of who they are on the one hand, and an unconfident imitation on the other. According to Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Lack of historical self-awareness impedes self-examination, a lack of a sense of history disables agency" (qtd. in Panwar 45).

Naipaul strongly believes that "Men need history; it helps them to have an idea of who they are" (EOA 318), but history has to be seen; and not to be blindly accepted and eulogized to abstraction. The past, if allowed to grow untrimmed, would choke the present. In this context, a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* gives a more balanced view:

India must break with much of her past and not allow it to dominate the present. Our lives are encumbered with the dead wood of the past; all that is dead and has served its purpose has to go. But that does not mean a break with, or a forgetting of, the vital and life-giving in that past (522).

It is not the past that one has to break with, but "the excrescences and abortions that have twisted and petrified the spirit" (Nehru 522).

V.S. Naipaul's emphasis on history and its amnesia is criticised by Rob Nixon as being a western prerogative and the past as an irrational category that belongs to the third world, one which poses an impediment to such cultures (121).



The Hindu India indeed is Naipaul's own search into himself and his genealogy which since childhood was experienced in its microcosmic form through symbols, icons, and anecdotes by his grandfather and father. Studying the metaphorical utopian Hindu India (*Ram Rajya*), he finds weaknesses and flaws in its own ideology. Its vulnerability led to the Emergency of June 1975. In this regard bearing the failure of democracy along with the realization of Hindu India, 1980s can be seen as the era of accelerated ascendance of the Hindu Right.

V.S. Naipaul in his agenda to enlighten his 'area of darkness' builds upon the Hindu ideas he was familiar with. As he wrote about the ideas/attitudes/history/literature related to the Hindu cult he was damningly labelled as "A cheer-leader for the BJP" (qtd. in Dhondy) by Salman Rushdie. William Dalrymple, in an article in *The Guardian*, asserted that V.S. Naipaul had no comprehension of history himself and was a self-confessed "supporter of the entire Sangh Parivar Programme" (Dhondy). It seems that V.S. Naipaul has used the phoenix technique in his assessment of India: as for the Hindu India to rise and realize, first it has to burn itself to its own Hindu malady (its obsessions and not the ideas). He openly denounces the wrongs done by people under the name of Hindutva. But this movement according to him is "a reaction to humiliation, suffering, and historical imperialism. It doesn't want to dominate the world. It is an awakening that can stimulate the population ..." (Dhondy). The *Wounded Civilization* also concludes on the awakening of the Hindu population projected through the ideas and working of the Shiv Sainiks.

V.S. Naipaul has a position of both an insider and an outsider. He is an Indian Brahmin disassociated from the land of his ancestors. Secondly, he is a West Indian by birth. Finally, he is an expatriate in London because of his self-chosen exile. His approach to Indian life and culture can be understood only in terms of his triple identity and a complex personality. With his own share of ambivalence and unstable identity V.S. Naipaul wrote about India when it was passing through its own stage of instability trying to ascertain its identity as a political nation during Emergency. He analyses Indian life and culture with the Hindu norms of *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha* and



counterbalances it with the Western norms of individuality and freedom. V.S. Naipaul's Hindu self can be documented through the background of his Hindu childhood.

I came of a family that abounded with Pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long and the food came only at the end. I did not understand the language, it was as if our elders expected that our understanding would be instinctive and no one explained the prayers or the ritual, one ceremony was like another. The images did not interest me. I never sought to learn their significance ... So it happened that though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained totally ignorant of Hinduism. What then survived of Hinduism in me? Perhaps I had received a certain supporting philosophy. I cannot say, my uncle often put it to me that my denial was an admissible type of Hinduism. Examining myself I found only that sense of the difference of people which I have tried to explain a vague sense of caste and the horror of the unclean (AOD 32-33).

The search into the times gone by starts for Naipaul from himself. He says,

And though in India I am a stranger, *the starting point of this inquiry*- more than might appear in these pages- *has been myself*. Because in myself, like the split-second images of infancy which some of us carry, there survive, from the family rituals that lasted into my childhood, phantasmal memories of old India which for me outline a whole vanished world [emphasis added] (IWC xi).

A.K Mehrotra states that "Naipaul's over reliance on what might be called the "Hindu cultural and philosophical system" to explain the brutalities of Indian society is not simply an anthropological inadequacy - it is in fact the keystone of the play of self, ancestral memory, and cultural desire that marks all his writings" (240).

Further, Sudha Rai's quote from V.S. Naipaul's Foreword to Seepersad Naipaul's collection of short stories, *The Adventures of Gurudeva and other Stories* can help in measuring the depth of his Hindu self, his urge to write about himself or "peripheral people" with "suppressed histories", and his love and hate relationship with India:

I do not know how, in such a setting in these circumstances of dependence and uncertainty, and with no example, the wish to be a writer came to my father. But I feel now, reading the



stories after a long time and seeing so closely (what was once hidden from me) the Brahmin standpoint from which they are written, that it might have been the caste sense, the Hindu reverence for learning and the world awakened by the beginnings of an English education and a Hindu religious training He was concerned from the starting with Hinduism and the practice of Hinduism ... as late as 1951, he was writing to me ecstatically about Aurobindo's commentaries on the Gita *They are written from within a community: a Hindu community*, essentially, which, because *the writer* assesses as a whole, he *can at times make romantic, and at other times satirise* *I stress it because this looking from being my father's become mine; my father's early stories created my background for me* [emphasis added] (11).

Furthering the issue of Hindu India- the homogenous Hindu *rashtra* (nation) is congruous with upper-caste Hindu beliefs and practices, which are central to the Hindu Right's agenda. As the author's of 'Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags' note: "At the heart of Hindutva lies the myth of a continuous thousand-year-old struggle of Hindus against Muslims as the structuring principle of Indian history" (Basu et al. 2). The figure of the Indian Muslim can be categorised as "the "intimate enemy" or the "stranger" in our midst, who is not quite a friend or an external enemy" (Kumar, Priya xvi). In the Indian landscape, Muslims, along with Christians, have often been viewed as non autochthonous not because they are born elsewhere but because they follow faiths that originated elsewhere, which Vir Savarkar propounded in his theory of Who is a Hindu?. The "strangeness" of the Muslims was further exacerbated by Partition in 1947 and creation of Pakistan as a separate nation for the subcontinent's Muslims. Mushirul Hasan, a Partition historian, does not see Partition as the consequence of Jinnah's two-nation theory (an outcome of irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims) but, as the consequence of consciousness of community, conceived by a small group, "as an ideological counterweight to secular nationalism" (i).

This Hindu strain forms a part of V.S. Naipaul's reaction towards Muslims in *An Area of Darkness*. Though the character of Aziz, Naipaul's personal servant in Srinagar has been created with utmost warmth, yet, at his farewell, even though he sees tears running down Aziz's cheeks, he says: "Even at that moment I would not be sure that he had ever been mine". Contrarily, on his way



back from Awantipur to Srinagar, with his past baggage of “vague sense of caste and a horror of the unclean” he unscrupulously takes food from the hands of a Brahmin dirty servant because “His *servant* was of the *right caste*; nothing served by the fingers of his *right hand* could be unclean” [emphasis added] (AOD 139-140). Here, right can also be studied as a metaphor and a binary opposite.

The time during which V.S. Naipaul wrote *India: A Wounded Civilization* was a crucial period in the recent Indian history. It was the time when India was going through the Emergency. And today, after more than four decades, the Emergency is remembered popularly as a political crisis in the history of Indian democracy by all and sundry. Bipan Chandra, a noted historian, recalls it in the following way:

In 1975, India experienced its *greatest political crisis* [emphasis added] since independence when internal emergency was declared on 26 June. How did the Emergency come about? Was there no other choice, as Indira Gandhi maintained, or was it the ultimate expression of her authoritarian tendencies, as the opposition alleged? Or did both sides indulge in obfuscation. The issue, in fact, is quite complex (246).

But, Naipaul does not see it simply as a political crisis. He maintains:

An inquiry about India- even an *inquiry about the Emergency*- has quickly to go *beyond the political*. It has to be an *inquiry about Indian attitudes*; it has to be an inquiry about the *civilization itself*, as it is [emphasis added] (IWC xi).

India: A Wounded Civilization thus becomes an assessment of Hindu India with its ideas that are lost and impediments because of free-wheeling obsessions. V.S. Naipaul sees the working of “intellectual crisis” at great length for the ‘golden’ India’s [non-shining] phase. He criticizes:

It is fundamental to the understanding of India’s intellectual secondariness, which is generally taken for granted but may be the most startling and depressing fact about the world’s second most populous country which now has little to offer the world except its Gandhism concept of holy poverty and the recurring crooked comedy of the holy men, and which, while asserting the antiquity of its civilization (and usually simply asserting



without knowledge or scholarship) is now dependent in every practical way on other imperfectly understood civilizations (IWC 104).

V.S. Naipaul was born 15 years before the Independence of India. He grew up with two ideas of India, one a kind of country from which his ancestors had come and the second which was the India of the Independence movement, the India of the great name. He wrote in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*:

I grew up with two ideas of India. The first idea not one I wanted to go into too closely was about the kind of country from which my ancestors had come There was a second India. It balanced the first. This second India was the India of the great names. It was also the India of the great civilization and the great classical past. It was the India by which in all the difficulties of our circumstances we felt supported. It was an aspect of our identity, the community identity we had developed, which in multi-racial Trinidad had become sure like a social identity This was the identity I took to India on my first visit in 1962. And when I got there I found it had no meaning in India. The idea of an Indian community- in effect, a continual idea of our Indian identity made sense only when the community was very small, a minority and isolated (7).

V.S. Naipaul since his birth has been an expatriate not only because of his genealogy but because of practice! Naturally the desire to know about origin, roots and home emerges from this fact. He mentions "I think ... between my birth and the age of seven, we lived in about seven or eight different houses" (qtd. in Mahabir). His Hindu impact lays large on his father Seeprasad's joining Arya Samaj Movement at Trinidad. Further, Mohamed Bakari mentions Naipaul, "As a Brahmin he feels duty bound to be in the forefront, as a historic and religious duty, to defend Indian culture and Hinduism" (248).

Naipaul uses Hinduism and Gandhism as the "referent frames" to discuss about Emergency and the present "intellectual depletion" (Mustafa 134). He examines the current Indian crisis with a peep into past by giving illustrations from novels. Akin to Emergency, in the novels of R.K. Narayan, Naipaul notices his fictional world torn "between the wish to preserve and be psychologically secure, and the need to undo" (IWC 16) the old equilibrium. But simultaneously,



Naipaul also views R. K. Narayan's novels as a "classic exposition of the Hindu equilibrium" (IWC 17), which is still being maintained. He finds R.K Narayan's unexamined sense of continuity as being a typically Hindu "simplification of reality" (IWC 11). He has earlier read Narayan's novels as social comedies, but now he sees them as more akin to Hindu religious fables. Naipaul observes that both Srinivas and Jagan have misunderstood Gandhi's views. They both venture into the world of doing, followed by a "withdrawal"- regressing to almost a karmic acceptance of life.

Naipaul sees in the character of Srinivas, the protagonist of *Mr. Sampath*, a misinterpretation of the ideas of *karma* and non-violence. According to Naipaul, Srinivas understands the Hindu idea of *nishkamkarma* as the equivalent of "non doing". The Hindu idea advocates that a person must perform his karma without thinking about benefits. It does not mean that one should withdraw from all action. But Srinivas, who takes up the cause of true journalism enthusiastically in the beginning, soon retreats to the idea of indifference and develops an almost saint-like ascetic attitude towards life. While he thundered against municipal or social shortcomings an inner conflict went on interrogating: "Life and the world and all this is passing. Why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother" (IWC 12).

Even in an incident of tiff with his wife, his attitude is *congratulatory!* [emphasis added] He believes "Non-violence in all matters, little or big, personal or national" (IWC 13) because Srinivas thinks that it facilitates "an unagitated, undisturbed calm, both in a personality and in society" (IWC 13). The Gandhian idea of non-violence degenerates into *sad quietism* [emphasis added] in Srinivas. For Srinivas, Gandhian non-violence becomes a means of securing an "undisturbed calm" (IWC 13). In the fate of Srinivas, Naipaul sees the fate of the vast Indian populace, who has likewise interpreted its religious philosophy superficially, and comments:

Out of a superficial reading of the past, then, out of the sentimental conviction that India is eternal and forever revives, there comes not a fear of further defeat and destruction, but an indifference to it. India will somehow look after itself; the individual is freed of all responsibility (IWC 15).

Another instance of the struggle between tradition and modernity is Jagan, a character in *The Vendor of Sweets* who is sustained in life by Gandhian principles which cannot equip him to



fight chaos in his life. Jagan's world gets crumbled, the old equilibrium gets shattered; when his son brings home a foreign girl and lives with her without marriage and is jailed for carrying liquor in his car. Jagan abandons his home and retreats to the jungle. Naipaul sees in Jagan a decadent idea of Hindu morality.

Naipaul tries to reveal the debility of Gandhian philosophy through the character of Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. He is a Gandhian who has worked for the independence of India, but he does not pay his sales tax. He cheats the very government for whose sake he had bravely taken police beatings during the British rule. Narayan mocks, "If Gandhi had said somewhere, "Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly," he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to sales tax anywhere to Jagan's knowledge" (IWC 28-29). Jagan has no idea of what Independence or self-governance means because as Naipaul comments- "Jagan's was a *holy war* [emphasis added]; he had a vision of his country cleansed and purified rather than a political vision of his country remade" (IWC 33). His world is limited to his idea of Gandhi because "the stress was on the fight for the truth rather than the fight against the British" (IWC 33). Naipaul holds "a multitude of Jagans," new to the idea of the state, responsible for undoing the independence.

Now the Jagans had begun to be rejected, and India was discovering that it had ceased to be Gandhian (IWC 36).

Naipaul sees these texts as representing India. For instance he considers the novel *The Vendor of Sweets* "a confused book and its confusion holds much of the Indian confusion today" (IWC 42). He examines the characters as existing in the narrow sphere of conformity, "content to be ruled in all things by others" a sphere where "ritual regulates the will". Rob Nixon asserts that with this Naipaul seems to give an orientalist reading of India as "his commonest argument is that nothing significant happens in "simple societies"- there is therefore nothing to tell" (IWC 122). The barbaric and reductionist view further adds to the third world status of India being a primitive society.

Naipaul assessed that the Hindu society with its ideals that Gandhi had "appeared to ennoble" during the struggle for Independence had started to "disintegrate with the rebirth and growth that had come with the Independence" (IWC 45). Post Independence there were no ideals



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but people were left with trauma, poverty, aggression, borrowed institutions, and colonial hangover. Congress as a party professed secularism but was a continuity of colonial rule, more of transfer of power from one monolith to the other. Despite its hegemony over the masses for long it could not provide strong cultural and ethical base which could provide enough strength to masses to pave new phase in their country's life. The realisation that India had ceased to be Gandhian also came with the chaos of the Emergency (IWC 46). The image of a Gandhian India had actually distorted the image of real India. Gandhi was the pioneer of a movement than the maker of a nation. The violence and cruelty which had been part of India and were obscured by non-violence were now coming up on the surface. It even led to the confusion of Indians themselves who even though practising violence would prefer to be typecast as believers of non-violence and the followers of Gandhi. Now the "older deeper, Indian violence" was brought out in the open in the press but this was not only a reference to state violence but the oppressive violence that had "become a part of the Hindu social order" (IWC 46). "The antique violence remained: rural untouchability as serfdom, maintained by terror and sometimes by deliberate starvation. None of this was new: but suddenly in India it was news" (IWC 47). In this disenchantment Naipaul sees Emergency as the moment of India's "awakening to its distress and the cruelties that had always lain below its apparent stability" (IWC 48). After Partition and the onslaught of Emergency "India needed a new code, but it had none" (IWC 46). He rejects both Hinduism and Gandhianism as being unsuitable for the present. Hinduism according to Naipaul had only "exposed us to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation Its philosophy of withdrawal has diminished men intellectually, and not equipped them to respond to challenge; it has stifled growth. So that again and again in India history has repeated itself: vulnerability, defeat, withdrawal" (IWC 53). According to Weiss, Naipaul views "Indian religion and philosophy as advocating surrender- to one's fate, to dehumanising living conditions, to the socio-economic mechanism of mills and chawls', a pattern that has been followed through the ages, leading to the "intellectual depletion of India" (127).

The emergence of Shiv Sena seems to be the only saving grace of this period. During the Emergency the right wing was able to gain considerable ground since many organisations had been banned and a lot of their leaders were put in jail. Moreover JP's alliance with the right also



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legitimised its existence to a large extent. He views the Sena as a “reworking of the Hindu system” and a “positive” movement despite it being called “fascist” which is in stark variance to its present image of being a highly sectarian outfit (IWC 62).

India’s “defect of vision” extends beyond Gandhi, poverty and torture as it failed to understand the political situation of India as well, which saw the rise of numerous regional and communal parties like the Shiv Sena, the Dravidian movement in the South, the Anand Marg and, most importantly, the Jan Sangh, fighting for the cow issue as well as nuclear power, which according to Naipaul emerged then as “the best organised opposition party; with its emphasis on Hindu power” (IWC 114). This defect of vision according to Rob Nixon emerge as a “fundamental flaw in the national character” (83) and also becomes a source of national integration.

Though Naipaul has done quite a lot of India bashing still his ambiguous statement seems to project a ray of hope out of disenchantment. As he remarks, “It is one of the paradoxes of India under the Emergency that make judgement about the Emergency so difficult: the dangers are obvious, but the results can appear positive” (IWC 131).

The methodology of narration adopted by Naipaul is empirical: observation, analysis and conclusion. The narrative passages contain his commentaries on the literature, society and politics of India. The narrative passages alternate between factual and analytical, and reflect on the current situation under discussion. The technique of non-fiction used by Naipaul is that of a travel and journalistic writing side by side giving us some insights into his autobiography.

The use of literature forms the other strand of the narrative. The part one of IWC embarks the argument with two novels by R.K Narayan: *Mr. Sampath* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. These two novels explain the ‘Old Equilibrium’ and the ‘Shattering World.’ U.R. Anantamurti’s *Samaskara* is used to analyze the role of *karma* in shaping the Indian sensibility by Naipaul. Henceforth, there is also use of personal histories of individuals. The book discusses the life, autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and ideology of Mahatma Gandhi. The use of newspaper excerpts and the documentation are from Deccan Herald of Bangalore, Indian Express, Economic Times, Blitz a popular left-wing weekly of Bombay, Statesman, Times of India, Bombay Handbook published by American Women’s Association. The other literature looked into is a letter from Sudhir Kakar,



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Nirad Chaudhuri's *To Live or Not To Live*, Prakash Tandon's autobiography *Punjabi Century* (1963), Judith M. Brown's *Gandhi's Rise to Power* (1972), Lanza del Vasto biography of Bhave, *Gandhi to Vinoba: the New Pilgrimage* (1956). This is how he gets material to write his non-fiction, and uses these as illustrations to justify his point.

Naipaul places the past under watchful assessment. The past only becomes a point of investigation and reference. The present needs to be involved with and tackled through its means. There is definitely a toning down of the bitterness that Naipaul has for India of the recent. Later on in his writings he even describes the darkness referred to as that of his mind rather than the nation. He feels that slowly the Indians are coming out of the ignorance and realizing the damage that has been done to the country by following trodden paths blindly. Passion is giving way to intellect and creativity based on liberalism is stepping in. Naipaul adds that India now appears to parody the old idea of itself.

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