



Knowledge, Power, and The Sacred: A Critique of Brahminical Hegemony and False Knowledge in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

This paper examines Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* (1995) as a profound critique of Brahminical hegemony, patriarchy, and the weaponization of sacred knowledge. Adapted from the Yavakrita myth in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Karnad reconstructs ancient lore to mirror contemporary socio-political anxieties regarding caste hierarchy and intellectual elitism. By juxtaposing the high-caste *Yagnashala* (sacrificial enclosure) against the subaltern, organic spaces of the tribal world, Karnad exposes how institutionalized religious knowledge is stripped of its spiritual essence and reduced to an instrument of power, surveillance, and ego. Through a critical analysis of the characters Yavakri, Raibhya, and Parvasu, this study argues that the play deconstructs "false knowledge"—intellectual or ascetic acquisition divorced from moral accountability—and contrasts it with the fluid, compassionate, and emancipatory ethos embodied by the subaltern figures, Nittilai and Arvasu. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how the play redefines the concept of a true sacrifice (Yajna), shifting it from mechanical ritualism to universal empathy.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Brahminical Hegemony, False Knowledge, Subaltern Resistance, Subversion of Myth, Ritualism.

1. Introduction

Girish Karnad stands as a monumental figure in post-independence Indian drama, celebrated for his unique ability to re-author historical narratives, folklore, and classical myths to address modern sociopolitical realities. In *The Fire and the Rain* (originally published in Kannada as *Agni Mattu Male* in 1995), Karnad engages with a minor myth from the *Mahabharata* told by the sage Lomasa to the Pandavas during their exile. The myth of Yavakrita, Raibhya, and Parvasu is fundamentally an existential cautionary tale concerning ascetic hubris and ancestral curses. However, under Karnad's dramatic lens, this narrative is transformed into a scathing critique of systemic caste oppression, gender exploitation, and the corruption of intellectual authority.

Set against the stark background of a ten-year drought, the play depicts a grand, state-sponsored seven-year fire sacrifice (Yajna) intended to appease Indra, the god of rain. Yet, the *Yagnashala* becomes less a site of communal piety and more a microcosm of a deeply fractured, Brahminical hegemony. Karnad systematically dismantles the traditional sanctity associated with the priestly class, revealing that their pursuit of absolute knowledge is merely an extension of their desire for absolute dominance. This paper analyzes the dramatic strategies through which Karnad critiques false knowledge and exposes the internal rot within the structures of elite spiritual hegemony.



Post-independence Indian English drama has frequently engaged with myth and folklore to dissect contemporary socio-political and existential anxieties. Among his peers, Girish Karnad stands out as a playwright whose works are profoundly preoccupied with the politics of identity, the limits of human agency, and the structures of authority. While plays like *Hayavadana* interrogate the mind-body duality and *Tughlaq* examines the disillusionment of political idealism, *The Fire and the Rain* (1995) addresses a more fundamental, underlying question: *What constitutes true knowledge, who has the structural right to possess it, and what happens when its acquisition is divorced from human ethics?*

Set against a bleak canvas of a ten-year drought that threatens the physical survival of an entire kingdom, the play positions a grand, seven-year *Yajna* (fire sacrifice) as the ultimate state-sponsored mechanism to invoke the divine and restore cosmic balance. However, the dramatic tension does not stem from a simple battle between human will and capricious gods. Rather, it emerges from the internal, intellectual, and moral rot consuming the very caretakers of sacred wisdom.

Karnad takes a relatively straightforward narrative from the *Mahabharata*—intended originally as a didactic warning against pride—and transforms it into a complex critique of systemic oppression. In doing so, he maps out an intricate epistemological landscape where characters do not merely clash over titles or women, but over the fundamental validity of their varying types and sources of knowledge.

This paper will examine how *The Fire and the Rain* interrogates the concept of knowledge. It will look at how Karnad breaks down the classic Indian philosophical divisions of *Vidya* (knowledge) and *Avidya* (ignorance/false knowledge), how he exposes the sources of intellectual authority as deeply corrupt, and how he uses subaltern and artistic perspectives to replace a dry, text-based, and patriarchal epistemology with an embodied, compassionate, and life-giving alternative.

2. Theoretical Framework: Knowledge, Power, and the Hegemonic Superstructure

To understand the structural critique in *The Fire and the Rain*, it is essential to look through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Michel Foucault's articulation of the knowledge-power nexus. Gramsci posits that a dominant class maintains control not merely through physical coercion, but through ideological consensus—persuading the subaltern classes to accept the dominant worldview as natural and normative. In the context of ancient and medieval Indian social stratification, Brahminical hegemony operated by monopolizing the access to, interpretation of, and execution of sacred texts and rituals.

Foucault famously asserted that knowledge and power are fundamentally integrated:

"There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."

In Karnad's play, the acquisition of Vedic knowledge and the performance of complex rituals are not pursued for spiritual liberation (*Moksha*). Instead, they are instruments used to establish structural hierarchy over the lower castes, dominate women, and assert political leverage over the ruling monarch. "False knowledge" in this paper is defined as an intellectual or ascetic accumulation that is completely divorced from human empathy, ethics, and social responsibility.

The Foucaultian Nexus: Power/Knowledge and Hegemony

This critique of false knowledge finds a theoretical framework in Michel Foucault's concept of *Savoir-Pouvoir* (Power/Knowledge). Foucault argued that knowledge is not an objective, neutral truth waiting to be discovered; rather, it is actively produced by social institutions to serve and sustain power relations. Power creates the fields of knowledge that validate its own existence, and conversely, knowledge reinforces the operations of power.

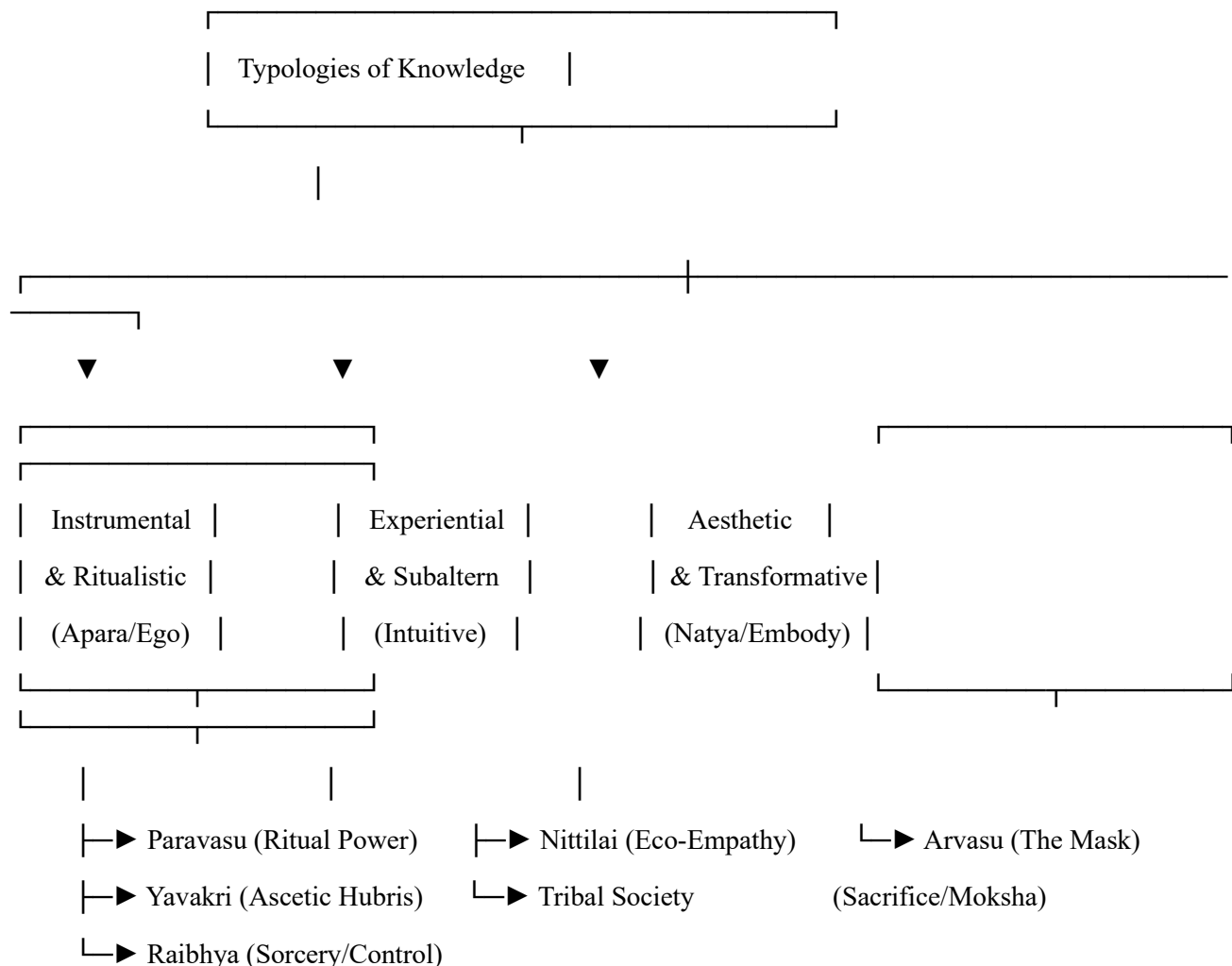
In the social hierarchy depicted in the play, Brahminical hegemony operates precisely through this Foucaultian loop. The high-caste priests have monopolized the means of knowledge production and spiritual validation. They



alone can read the texts, speak Sanskrit, and communicate with the gods. This monopoly gives them immense political leverage over the King, who must finance their *Yajna* to legitimize his own rule during a crisis.

Furthermore, this knowledge is used as an apparatus of surveillance and discipline over women and lower castes. Anyone who attempts to acquire knowledge outside this sanctioned framework, or who challenges its validity, is met with severe structural violence. Karnad's play is a systematic attempt to disrupt this hegemony by showing that the elite's "sacred knowledge" is actually a matrix of political survival, emotional repression, and criminal cover-ups.

Typologies of Knowledge Within the Play



2.1. Instrumental and Ritualistic Knowledge (Karmakanda)

This type of knowledge is mechanical, procedural, and heavily focused on external execution. It is epitomized by **Parvasu**, the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice. For Parvasu, knowledge is a highly structured technology used to manipulate cosmic forces and human subjects alike. He views the seven-year *Yajna* not as an act of humble devotion to relieve his starving people, but as a complex performance that demands flawless technical execution.

Parvasu's instrumental knowledge allows him to compartmentalize his life entirely. He can commit patricide in the dark of the forest and return to the *Yagnashala* moments later, convinced that his ritual status remains uncompromised as long as the external motions of the sacrifice are maintained.

When his brother Arvasu arrives, carrying the burden of their father's cremation, Parvasu uses his authoritative knowledge of ritual law to declare Arvasu polluted, thereby framing him for the murder. Here, ritualistic



knowledge is exposed as a cynical, Machiavellian tool used to maintain absolute state power and personal immunity.

2.2. Ascetic and Individualistic Knowledge (Tapas-Based Vidya)

Represented by **Yavakri**, this type of knowledge is characterized by intense, solitary intellectual and physical exertion aimed at achieving individual supremacy. Yavakri spends ten long years in the jungle, subjecting his body to extreme mortification to wrest the secret of universal knowledge directly from Indra.

However, Yavakri's concept of knowledge is deeply transactional and market-oriented. He wants a quick shortcut to spiritual equality with Raibhya's family. When Indra warns him that true knowledge cannot be gained through sheer stubbornness without passing through the foundational stages of study and discipleship, Yavakri threatens to blind himself, essentially blackmailing the deity.

When he finally receives the boon of universal knowledge, it does not express itself as enlightened wisdom. Instead, it manifests as an arrogant sense of invulnerability. He uses his newly acquired status to sedate his deep-seated insecurities and vindicate his family's honor by seducing Vishakha. Yavakri's knowledge is entirely defensive and aggressive; it is an intellectual armor designed to protect a fragile, vengeful ego.

2.3. Occult and Coercive Knowledge (Tantric/Sorcery Vidya)

Raibhya represents the dark, coercive deployment of scriptural and supernatural knowledge. He does not seek cosmic harmony or political titles; he seeks absolute domestic and patriarchal submission. His knowledge consists of dark incantations, curses, and the manipulation of spectral energies.

When he discovers Yavakri's transgression with Vishakha, Raibhya does not turn to ethical introspection or conventional justice. Instead, he performs a retaliatory ritual, ripping a lock of his hair to create a *Krittika*—a terrifying, bloodthirsty demon (the Brahma Rakshasa)—instructing it to hunt Yavakri down.

Raibhya's knowledge is fundamentally rooted in fear, surveillance, and control. It is an epistemology that reduces the sacred into a mechanism for enforcing toxic, patriarchal codes of honor and punishing any deviation from his absolute authority.

2.4. Experiential, Intuitive, and Subaltern Knowledge (Lokavidya)

In sharp, deliberate contrast to the destructive intellectualism of the Brahmin triad stands the knowledge system of **Nittilai** and her tribal community. This is an epistemology that does not rely on written texts, secret languages, or divine boons. It is an organic, experiential knowledge born out of a symbiotic relationship with nature and an instinctive commitment to human survival.

Nittilai possesses a deep, ecological wisdom. She understands the rhythms of the earth, the patterns of animal behavior, and the practical demands of human suffering. While the high-caste priests allow the population to wither away under a ten-year drought while burning precious wood and ghee in their enclosed altars, Nittilai's knowledge is directed toward sustenance. She knows where to find water, how to nurse a broken body, and how to offer comfort without conditions.

Her knowledge is transparent, communal, and inherently democratic. It is an epistemology of care that continuously exposes the sterile, life-denying nature of the Brahminical establishment.

2.5. Aesthetic and Transformative Knowledge (Natya Vidya)

The final, and ultimately redeeming, type of knowledge in the play is embodied by **Arvasu** and the Actor-Manager through the medium of theater (Natya). Derived from Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*—which is traditionally hailed as the "Fifth Veda"—this type of knowledge operates through emotional vulnerability, physical embodiment, and collective catharsis.



Unlike the exclusive and guarded knowledge of the *Yagnashala*, *Natya Vidya* is inherently public, fluid, and inclusive. It requires the performer to shed their personal identity and don a mask, becoming a vessel for a collective truth.

For Arvasu, theater begins as a passionate escape from the rigid expectations of his Brahmin lineage, but it ultimately matures into the highest form of spiritual and ethical awareness. It is through the visceral, artistic knowledge of performance that the hidden crimes of the hegemonic elite are unmasked, providing a path toward genuine cosmic regeneration.

The Sources of Knowledge: Legitimacy and Subversion

Elite / Hegemonic Sources

- Divine Intervention (Yavakri)
- Scriptural Lineage (Raibhya)
- State-Sanctioned Ritual (Parvasu)

Subaltern / Alternative Sources

- Experiential/Nature (Nittilai)
- Aesthetic Embodiment (Arvasu)
- Empathy & Self-Sacrifice

3. The Anatomy of False Knowledge: Yavakri, Raibhya, and Parvasu

Karnad presents a triad of high-caste male characters—Yavakri, his uncle Raibhya, and Raibhya's eldest son Parvasu—who collectively embody the intellectual arrogance and moral bankruptcy of the hegemonic elite. Each character's pursuit of knowledge is driven by a deep-seated pathology of ego and vengeance.

3.1. Yavakri and the Illusion of Ascetic Mastery

Yavakri spends ten years in solitary penance in the forest to extract the secret of universal knowledge directly from the god Indra. His motivation is explicitly political and dynastic; he seeks to avenge the perceived social marginalization of his father, Bharadwaja, who was bypassed when the King chose Parvasu to be the Chief Priest of the grand *Yajna*.

When Indra grants him his boon, Yavakri returns to society brimming with an arrogant sense of spiritual untouchability. However, his "knowledge" fails to grant him self-control or ethical clarity. His very first act upon returning is to sexually violate Vishakha, his former lover and Parvasu's current wife, as a calculated strike against his rival's domestic honor. Yavakri's knowledge is external, mechanical, and transactional; it does not transform his consciousness. Karnad uses Yavakri to illustrate that ascetic intellectualism, when decoupled from moral rectitude, becomes predatory.

3.2. Raibhya and the Tyranny of Institutionalized Patriarchy

Raibhya, Parvasu's father, represents the grotesque accumulation of structural authority. He is a master of scriptures and a potent sorcerer, yet he is consumed by bitter jealousy toward his own sons and a toxic, misogynistic rage toward his daughter-in-law, Vishakha. Raibhya uses his ritualistic knowledge to summon a demonic force—the *Krittika* or the Brahma Rakshasa—not to defend dharma, but to hunt down and murder his nephew Yavakri out of pure spite.

Raibhya's character highlights how Brahminical patriarchy uses sacred authority to police female sexuality and enforce domestic tyranny. His knowledge is entirely destructive, functioning as an elite weapon of surveillance and violence.

3.3. Parvasu and the Machiavellian Sacrificial Complex

Parvasu represents the apex of institutionalized hegemony. As the Chief Priest (Adhvaryu) of the royal sacrifice, he occupies the highest seat of spiritual and political influence in the kingdom. Yet, Parvasu is a cold,



emotionally detached sociopath. He abandons his wife Vishakha to the isolation of the hermitage, treating her not as a companion but as a domestic fixture.

When Parvasu catches his father Raibhya performing black magic and abusing Vishakha, he shoots him dead. Crucially, Karnad alters the original epic myth here: Parvasu's patricide is not an accident. It is a deliberate, cold-blooded murder. Parvasu kills his father to eliminate a rival power center and protect his unblemished public reputation.

He then commits the ultimate hegemonic crime: he frames his innocent, soft-hearted younger brother, Arvasu, for the murder, ordering him to perform the penance (*Prayaschitta*) so that he himself can return to the *Yagnashala* uninterrupted. For Parvasu, the sacred fire is merely a stage for his own absolute hubris.

4. The Subaltern Contrast: Nittilai, Arvasu, and Organic Morality

To dismantle this oppressive framework of false knowledge, Karnad introduces counter-hegemonic spaces and characters that operate entirely outside the Brahminical matrix.

4.1. Nittilai as the Voice of Eco-Feminist and Subaltern Truth

Nittilai, a fourteen-year-old girl from the hunter tribe, is entirely Karnad's creative invention, and she serves as the moral compass of the play. Lacking formal education, knowledge of the Vedas, or high-caste lineage, Nittilai possesses what the elite lack: a grounded, instinctual empathy and an organic connection to the life-giving forces of nature.

While the Brahmins engage in abstract, long-drawn-out discussions on sacrificial purity while the populace starves, Nittilai acts. She questions the basic morality of their sacred spaces:

Why do they need an enclosed space to meet God? Why does their fire only consume wood and ghee while the fields crack open from thirst?

Nittilai provides water to the dying Yavakri, offers shelter to the battered Arvasu, and consistently prioritizes human life over caste taboos and marital laws. Her critique exposes the *Yagnashala* as an artificial, life-denying structure built upon the exploitation of the land and its subaltern peoples.

4.2. Arvasu and the Rejection of Hegemonic Inheritance

Arvasu, Parvasu's younger brother, occupies a liminal space. Born into the highest Brahmin caste, he actively resists inheriting its oppressive mantle. Arvasu rejects the dry, rigid pursuit of Vedic recitations in favor of art, theater, and his love for the tribal girl Nittilai.

By choosing to become an actor, Arvasu willingly undergoes social degradation, as the Brahminical order views theater as a polluting, low-caste profession. Arvasu's path is one of systematic stripping of privilege. He is exploited by his brother, beaten by his community, and broken by grief. Yet, his willingness to step outside the dominant ideological framework positions him as the only entity capable of bringing about genuine cosmic and social regeneration.

5. Dramatic Devices: The *Yagnashala* vs. The Theater

The Sacrificial Enclosure (*Yagnashala*)

Exclusive, guarded by armed soldiers, and deeply hierarchical.

Associated with elite language (Sanskrit), secrecy, and hidden crimes.

The Democratic Theater Space

Inclusive, open to all castes, classes, and genders.

Associated with performance, emotional transparency, and raw truth.



Functions to consolidate the status quo of the ruling el Functions to subvert, unmask, and challenge authorit

In Act III, these two spaces violently collide through the device of the *play-within-a-play*. Arvasu joins a troupe of actors to perform *The Mask of Vritra* before the sacrificial assembly. Arvasu dons the mask of Vritra, the demon who was treacherously betrayed and murdered by his brother Indra.

As the performance intensifies, the boundary between ritual reality and theatrical fiction dissolves. Arvasu, possessed by the tragic agony of Vritra, acts out his own repressed trauma of being betrayed by Parvasu. The performance becomes a site of radical truth-telling; it unmasks Parvasu's hidden patricide and moral corruption in front of the entire assembly.

The simulated madness of the theater completely disrupts and collapses the calculated, false order of the *Yajna*, driving a guilt-stricken Parvasu to commit self-immolation by walking into the sacrificial fire.

[Brahminical Ritual: Yagnashala] —► Built on False Knowledge & Secrecy

|
(Structural Collision)
|

[Subaltern Art: The Mask Play] —► Unmasks Hegemonic Crimes & Guilt

6. The True *Yajna*: Redemption and Cosmological Balance

The climax of *The Fire and the Rain* redefines the very essence of sacrifice. Following the tragic murder of Nittilai by her own tribesmen for violating caste-enforced marital codes, Indra appears to Arvasu, lured by the chaotic rupture caused by the theatrical performance. Indra offers Arvasu a boon.

At this crossroad, Arvasu faces a profound existential choice. He can ask for Nittilai to be brought back to life (satisfying his personal, romantic desire), or he can seek catastrophic vengeance against the society that destroyed his happiness. However, the air is filled with the agonizing, desperate wails of the *Brahma Rakshasa*—the restless spirit of Raibhya's demonic creation, trapped in an eternal limbo of thirst and torment.

Guided by the residual spirit of Nittilai's universal compassion, Arvasu surrenders his own ego, grief, and desire. He uses his singular boon to plead for the salvation and liberation (Moksha) of his torturer, the Brahma Rakshasa:

"Let him be free, Indra. Take my happiness, but release him from this endless agony."

This act of absolute, unconditional selflessness is the true *Yajna*. It stands in stark contrast to the seven years of mechanical, arrogant fire-burnings orchestrated by Parvasu. Arvasu's sacrifice is not born out of scriptural knowledge, but out of absolute empathy for a suffering consciousness. It is only when this ego-shattering, non-hegemonic sacrifice is made that the cosmological balance is restored: the fires of human greed and vengeance are quenched, the heavens open up, and the long-awaited rain pours down upon the parched earth.

7. Conclusion

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad delivers a timeless critique of how sacred structures and intellectual institutions can be weaponized to preserve power and perpetuate systemic violence. By exposing the ethical rot within the elite circle of Yavakri, Raibhya, and Parvasu, Karnad demonstrates that knowledge without humanity is a destructive, "false" entity—a fire that consumes its own creators.

True enlightenment and cosmic harmony do not reside within the guarded, pure walls of the hegemonic *Yagnashala*, but are found in the open, empathetic, and inclusive spaces occupied by the marginalized. Through the ultimate triumph of Arvasu's selfless act over Parvasu's ritualistic hubris, Karnad



powerfully argues that society can only be rejuvenated when it discards the cold metrics of institutionalized hegemony and embraces the fluid, inclusive waters of universal compassion.

Ultimately, Karnad warns us that intellectual excellence and technical expertise, when cut off from human ethics and empathy, inevitably turn into "false knowledge". True knowledge is born out of our shared lived experience, our creative expressions, and our willingness to step across boundaries to care for one another. The falling of the rain at the end of the play is not a victory for ancient rituals; it is a celebration of the collapse of an arrogant hegemony, proving that our world is renewed not by the cold exercise of power, but by the healing waters of compassion and selflessness.

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