

# BANARAS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD: A HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Kashi is known as Banaras; throughout various eras, it has been referred to as Kashi, Kasay, and Banaras, with Varanasi used today. In the early 19th century, the British recorded the city as 'Banaras' in their documents. To truly appreciate the diversity of Banaras, one must examine its social, cultural, political, and economic facets, as well as its history.

Geographically, the present day Varanasi region is bordered by Jaunpur to the north, Ghazipur to the northeast, Chandauli to the east, Sant Ravidas Nagar (Bhadohi) to the west, and the Mirzapur district to the south. The geographical extent of ancient Kashi likely varied across eras. a fact reflected in the differing accounts in ancient literature and archaeological records and its boundaries have continued to shift over time.

While it is certainly appropriate to describe Banaras as an ancient city, neither scholars of Oriental studies nor sociologists have provided a comprehensive interpretation that fully captures its nature, whether as an ancient city or as a religiously and socially organised entity. Although accounts of Kashi from antiquity exist, there is a lack of adequate explanation regarding the social and cultural transformations that have occurred over time. Scholars of Oriental studies have often deemed it inappropriate to document or present Kashi's secular culture. however, a sociological perspective necessitates such an analysis, requiring an examination of the city's history alongside its social and cultural dimensions.

Among India's many pilgrimage sites, Banaras stands out as a city where spiritual leaders from the Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and Hindu traditions are accorded equal respect and reverence. For these reasons, Kashi is known as a confluence of diverse cultures. This research paper presents an analytical and critical study of the various facets of colonial Banaras, offering a fresh perspective on the city's significance across social, cultural, economic, and historical dimensions.

**KEYWORD:** Kashi, Varansi, Banaras, Culture, Holly City, Varna, Purusharthas, Ganga-Putra, Mathas (Monasteries) & Mahamahopadhyaya.

## INTRODUCTION

Kashi is known as Banaras and other names for the city include Kashi, Kasay and Banaras, while it is currently known as Varanasi. In the early 19th century, the British recorded the city's name as Banaras. The diversity of Banaras can be observed across social, cultural, political, economic, and historical dimensions.

History of any country, province, or city, it is essential to know its natural and geographical environment. Understanding how geographical changes and natural topography influence historical events helps in deciphering complex historical questions. Banaras is considered one of the world's oldest cities, holding cultural significance since ancient times. Its importance evident from the era when the Aryans, led by Videha Madhava, cleared the forests of Uttar Pradesh and established the Kosala "Janapada" (kingdom) upon reaching the banks of the Sadanira and Gandak rivers (Chand Moti, 2010:15). It was during this period that the Kashyas (or Kasayas) established their settlement in Kashi(Altekar, A.S. 1937:9). The geographical location of Banaras was a key factor in the Kashyas choosing it as their home; the city is situated in a crescent shape along the left bank of the Ganges. Geographically, it lies at approximately 25°18' North latitude and 83°1' East longitude. In the current context, the region spans latitudes 24°43' to 25°35' North and longitudes 82°11' to 83°34' (U.P. Gazetteers, V., 1965:1) East, extending across both banks of the Ganges. Banaras measures 82 miles (133 km) from east to west and 58 miles (94 km) from north to south.

Varanasi region is bordered by Jaunpur to the north, Ghazipur to the northeast, Chandauli to the east, Sant Ravidas Nagar (Bhadohi) to the west, and the Mirzapur district to the south. The geographical extent of ancient Kashi likely varied across different eras, with descriptions found in ancient literature and archaeological records differing accordingly, its boundaries have shifted according time to time .

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research implications both qualitative and quantitative methods, utilizing primary and secondary sources alongside historical, sociological, statistical and scientific comparative approaches, as well as an interdisciplinary

perspective. Sources of Data Collection Evidence was gathered through questionnaires and interviews and the collected facts and data were analyzed following their classification.

### **Ancient History of Kashi**

Banaras is name of ancient Kashi that can be described as a historic city that embodies a synthesis of Indian culture. contemporary public scenario, it is revered as a holy city of India (Shering, M.A., 1864:80). Historically, however, the Kashi region developed as an urban centre that served as a hub for trade and trade roots of geographical point. Dr. Moti Chandra, say that, the founding of Varanasi in ancient times was not based on religious grounds (Chand Moti, 2010:1). While Banaras is indeed regarded as a religious city, its development within the context of Hinduism occurred at a later stage; references to Kashi in the "Manusmriti" are scarce, whereas detailed accounts of Banaras abound in the "Jataka" tales and Buddhist scriptures. In ancient times, it did not have a significant association with "Sanatana Dharma". Although religious texts and beliefs claim Banaras to be the oldest city in the world, in reality, it cannot be considered the oldest city globally, nor even the oldest in India; historians identify a site named Merico in the Jordan Valley is located in the northern region of the Dead Sea in the world's oldest city based on archaeological excavations. first urbanized region in the India as archaeological evidence of points to the Bronze Age Indus Valley Civilization ( 2600BCE - 2000BCE). Sites such as Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Kalibangan, Lothal, and Dholavira featured houses built of baked bricks, streets intersecting at right angles, drainage systems, and fortified citadels. Based on these characteristics, the Indus Valley Civilization is recognized as the first urban civilization. V. Gordon Childe. decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, the Vedic culture developed and expanded in the Ganga-Yamuna region, ushering in an era of agricultural and technological revolution. This period also saw the rise of the sixteen "Mahajanapadas" (Great kingdoms), sparking a new transformation in the Ganga -Yamuna region. A phenomenon famously known as India's "Second Urbanization." Cities such as Kaushambi, Rajgriha, Kashi (Varanasi) and Mathura developed during this time. In the Kaushambi region, a fortified citadel featuring baked-clay ramparts was constructed. Excavations at Rajghat (ancient Kashi archaeological site) revealed brick embankments and walls chronology back to the 7th–8th century BCE.

Banaras, According by archaeologists have stated that the city of Varanasi cannot be chronological ordered earlier than the 9th century BCE. That bricks structures unearthed there chronology back to the 800– 900BCE period. Excavations in the Rajghat area have yielded evidence spanning from 6th century BCE to 2nd century BCE. However, based on this evidence alone, Banaras cannot be classified as a "city" in the strict sense, as urban civilization requires the presence of specific additional criteria. Neither literary nor archaeological evidence has been sufficient to definitively classify Varanasi as a city. Consequently, studies incorporating astronomical knowledge and a scientific perspective were conducted. These suggest that the last glacial period ended around 800BCE, causing massive water runoff into the Gangetic plains. That, this context, references in the "Ramayana" describing how King Bhagiratha brought the Ganges down to the plains. This regarding point to a much earlier time frame, specifically 6500BCE. Furthermore, the "Vastav Ramayana" this is a version of the epic found in the 'Kannada and Marathi' linguistic regions that appears to align with a date of 6961BCE. The antiquity of Gyanvapi and Anand-Kanan in Kashi is considered to predate the existence of the Ganges in Banaras and viewed from this perspective of scientific dating for the establishment of "Anand-Kanan" goes back to 6500 BCE.

Alongside 'Kashi', 'Varanasi' was a widely known ancient name of the city and the name of 'Banaras' also appears during the British era. According to Puranic texts, the area situated between the Varuna and Assi rivers is designated as Varanasi. Various theories exist regarding the naming of Varanasi, Banaras, and Kashi. Based on these theories and Puranic texts, Kashi is identified as the ancient name of the city. While the term 'Varanasi' and the name 'Banaras' gained prominence later with 'Varanasi' being defined and 'Banaras' becoming common during the British period. the Puranic naming convention was based on the region's geography and its rivers, specifically the Varuna and Assi. The tract of land lying between these two rivers was termed Varanasi. The conceptualization of Varanasi as the area between the Assi and Varuna rivers arose alongside the region's growing religious significance and the expansion of the population into the southern zone. In the "Mahabharata", the inhabitants of the region associated with the Varuna (or Varana) river are referred to as residents of Varanasi, linking them to the name 'Varana'. There is also a mention of a tree named 'Varana', Puranic literature suggests that a place surrounded by "Varana" trees was called Varanasi much like how Kaushambi was named after the "Koshev" tree. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Varanasi region encompassed the Rajghat mound, the surrounding upland plains, and the area adjacent to the Varuna river. The city of Varanasi is also known as Kashi; if the word 'Kashi' is derived from the root "kash", its literal meaning is 'shining' or 'radiant'. The earliest mention of the name Kashi is found in "Paippalada" recension of the Atharvaveda and the name is also cited in the Shatapatha Brahmana.

Social, cultural, and economic history of colonial Banaras is marked by immense diversity. In the terms use of tradition and history, Kashi is one of the oldest cities in the world and holding a unique place among ancient cities due to its religious and cultural significance. The River Ganges holds a special place and significance in Kashi, the city of Shiva, the river is the soul of Kashi and the defining identity of this spiritual city. Beyond its cultural traditions, the Ghats and temples of Kashi reflect the entire cycle of life. The crescent shaped Ghats collectively narrate the history of various eras, religions, and cultures. The diverse temples, "Mathas" (Monasteries), and "Dharamshalas" (Pilgrims rest houses) of Banaras celebrate past cultures while illustrating the evolution of human lifestyles from the past to the present. The gathering of tourists at the Ghats of Kashi (Banaras) reflects the cultural presence of all of India. For those devoted to tradition, the lifestyle and diversity of Banaras along with the city's role as the final resting place at Harishchandra Ghat and the great cremation ground of Manikarnika Ghat is represent a cherished lifelong aspiration.

The historical significance of Banaras is evident in the religious and cultural diversity that has flourished across various eras. its historical heritage remains visible today through archaeological excavations and sites. Ancient texts (Puranas)

describe Kashi as a sacred abode not only for Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesha, Surya, and Brahma but also as a significant site associated with the lives of the Buddha, Jain Tirthankaras, and revered figures such as Acharya Shankaracharya, Madhvacharya, Ramanandacharya, Kabir Das, Tulsidas and Guru Nanak Dev. The cultural events associated with various sects bear witness to the diversity of Banaras. Traditions here include the celebration of Dev-Diwali on Kartik Purnima, the Nagnathaiya fair at Tulsi Ghat, the Narsingh fair, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Ramlila, Ganesh Puja, the Budhwa Mangal fair, the Bharat Milap at Nati Imli, as well as Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic festivals. Kashi, an ancient Indian city, is associated with the four "Purusharthas" (Goals of human life): "Dharma" (Righteousness), "Artha" (Prosperity), "Kama" (Desire), and "Moksha" (Liberation). In this context, Gadolia Crossing is regarded as a focal point for these four elements of life. To the east, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the "Ghats" along the Ganges represent the realm of "Dharma", while Manikarnika Ghat is revered as the site of "Moksha" the final stage of life. To the west, the market near the commercial hub of Gadolia Crossing embodies "Artha", while Dal Mandi represents the realm of "Kama".

### **Social and Cultural Diversity of Kashi**

While it is certainly appropriate to describe Banaras as an ancient city, neither Indologists nor sociologists have provided a comprehensive analysis that fully captures its nature but Indologists have not adequately addressed the sociological aspects, and sociologists have not fully integrated the historical context. Although accounts of Kashi exist from ancient times, there is a lack of proper documentation regarding the social and cultural transformations that have occurred over the ages. However, from a sociological perspective, such an analysis is essential, requiring an examination of the city's history alongside its social and cultural dimensions.

To understand the social and cultural phenomena of Kashi's urban life, one must consider four key dimensions. It is a confluence of diverse cultures, a place defined by the interplay of poverty, economic disparity, and social change. This city possessing a rich traditional heritage and a witness to both creativity and modernity. Banaras boasts a unique way of life and culture, characterized by distinctive culinary habits, lifestyles, and patterns of daily living. Often referred to as a city of zest and flavour, it is within these very characteristics that the true diversity of Banaras must be explored.

The India, the culture of a state is often defined by its indigenous inhabitants; however, the culture of Banaras presents a composite character. Just like as Kolkata is considered the quintessential city of Bengalis, Mumbai of Maharashtrians and Gujaratis, and Madras of the Tamil people, what defines the culture of Banaras? This is a profound question. Should it be termed a hub of scholarly erudition? Should it be seen as the domain of boatmen, Ahirs (Yadavs), and the "Gangaputras" (sons of the Ganges)? or should it be regarded as the home of the Bengalis, Gujaratis, Marathis, Tamils, Maithilis, and Nepalis who reside in its myriad neighborhoods and alleys? Have they managed to preserve their ancestral cultures to this day? Have they kept themselves insulated from modern secular culture, continuing to uphold ancient traditions? Is the religious culture here inspired by a spirit of coexistence? If so, how does it integrate elements from other cultures? It is through these aspects that one must understand the spiritual and cultural mysteries of Kashi. What role do deities like Agiyavir, Datiavir, Lahuravir, Khokhi Mata, and Chhatpati Mata play in actual daily life? What compels a Muslim to sit by the banks of the Ganges, deeply immersed in meditation and musical devotion to Lord Shiva? In the Shivala neighbourhood, Hindu mothers visit a "Mazar" (shrine) to pray for the lives and well being of their children.

Among India's many pilgrimage sites, Banaras stands out as a city where spiritual scholar from Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and Hindu traditions are accorded equal respect. For these reasons, Kashi is known as a confluence of diverse cultures.

"Varna" system is a prominent feature of the Indian social order and the pursuit of both material and spiritual goals is considered one of the reasons for its existence. The system is divided into four categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. While the system was originally based on "Karma" during the Vedic period and birth became the determining factor in the post-Vedic period. Thus "Varna" system facilitated the organized execution of various societal functions. A reference to this system is found in the "Rigveda" (specifically in "Mandala" 10, "Sukta" 90).

Similarly, "Varna" system is evident in the social structure of Banaras region. Division of roles associated with this system is observable from ancient times through the colonial era. Brahmin "Varna" was responsible for acquiring knowledge, propagating religion through that knowledge, and performing religious duties; religious preceptors carried out these tasks in educational institutions and centers of learning such as temples and "Mathas" (Monasteries). This same framework of Kshatriya "Varna" was tasked with governance and administrative responsibilities. The Vaishya work for merchant and engaged in trade and commerce. A presence visible in the lanes and near the "Ghats" of Banaras. Shudra "Varna" holds a significant place in the social structure of Banaras. Notably, that this community provided shelter to King Harishchandra at Harishchandra Ghat. This "ghat" is the site where the final ritual such as cremation are performed after death and members of this community are also involved in cottage industries within the city (Sarsvati V. 2000:126).

Records exist detailing the twenty seven distinct communities and sects residing near the Ghats of Banaras, including the Nagar, Mor, Udich, Kherwal, Mewar, Kanyakubja, Bengali, and Ganga Putra groups. When Lord Curzon, a staunch proponent of British imperialism visited Banaras in 1930 in his capacity as Viceroy, high-ranking officials sought advice on selecting two individuals to represent of the city, one from the Hindu community and the other from the Muslim community. Pandit Sudhakar Dwivedi was chosen to represent Hindu society. This selection was made specifically to preserve the religion and culture of Banaras and to safeguard Indian culture within the city.

Revolution of 1857 British hegemony was re-established in India. The Government of India Act 1858 transferred governance from the East India Company to the direct rule of Queen Victoria. January 1st, 1877 of British Parliament proclaimed Queen Victoria as the Empress of India. That same year, the Queen declared that there would be no discrimination or interference in India's religious and cultural affairs and affirmed her respect for the country's religion and culture. In 1887, marking the 50th anniversary of her reign, the colonial administration announced the conferral of the title 'Mahamahopadhyaya' upon Sanskrit scholars (Cotton, Evan, 1932:43). 1887 onwards, the title was accompanied

by the ceremonial presentation of a turban and a shawl. Years ago 1917, recipients of the 'Mahamahopadhyaya' title also began receiving an annual pension of 100 rupees( Upadhyay P.Baldev 1983:150 ). The official certificate of (sanad) accompanying the title included a respectful certificate signed by the Viceroy. Since independence, Sanskrit scholars in India have been conferred a title known as the "President's Certificate of Honour" (often referred to as the "Award of President's Certificate"), which also carries a pension.

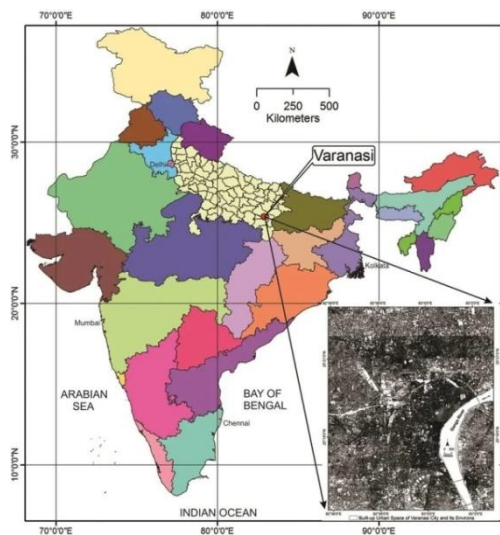
Brahmin community holds significant influence within the Hindu religious landscape of Banaras. Their population is estimated to exceed 20,000; additionally, in his accounts, Motichand has provided details regarding the livelihoods of Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras in the city alongside Brahmins. James Prinsep has documented 69 different types of occupations pursued by these various groups residing in different parts of Banaras. For all these “varnas” and castes in Banaras, their roles have consistently involved balancing trade and commerce with the fulfilment of social responsibilities (Prinsep, James, 1832:17).

During the era of colonial rule, the British government conducted a census in 1911. In this census, the Harijan community was designated a separate status, distinct from the Hindu fold, effectively treating them as a separate entity. When news of this reached the Banaras region, scholars (Pandits) from the area voiced their opposition. A key reason for this resistance was their assertion that the Harijan community was not a separate class but an integral part of Hindu society; thus, categorizing them as a distinct entity was deemed inappropriate. A massive public meeting was organized at the Banaras Town Hall under the chairmanship of Pandit Shiv Kumar Shastri, inviting the local populace to protest against this scheme of the colonial administration. The British colonial government's move was vehemently condemned and criticized, with the demand that Harijans be recognized as an integral part of Hindu society. This resistance in Banaras evolved into a mass movement against the British authorities, challenging the imposed social discrimination and inequality. Ultimately, the British administration yielded to the scholars' opposition; consequently, Harijans were not listed as a separate entity but were included as an integral part of Hindu society in the census. Thus, the resistance in Banaras successfully countered the British policy of social segregation.

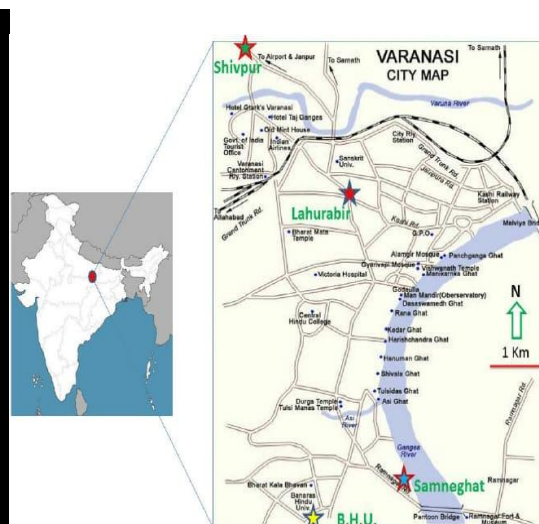
James Prinsep provided accounts of Sanyasis and Hindu “fakirs” alongside the Hindu community in Banaras. He also documented the various professions practiced by Muslims in the city, noting that they engaged in 44 different trades, with weaving being particularly prominent. The population of weavers in Banaras was notably higher than in other regions. In his study of Banaras, Edwin Greaves presents an account of both Hindu and Muslim communities, noting that they do not differ in religion and culture from people in other regions; rather, their social and cultural practices mirror those of Indian society at large. However, in Banaras, they have long upheld these various traditions in a spirit of harmony and collective observance.

Social structure of Banaras, the “Ganga-Putras” (Sons of the Ganges). along with the priests, “Mahants”, and “Pandit-Pujaris” residing at the “Ghats” hold special significance (Kumar, Nita, 1987:33(3)). It is they who bear the responsibility for performing the various religious rituals at the “Ghats”. Until the 18th century, the “Ganga-Putras” alone received the alms and ritual offerings “Daan-Dakshina” given at the “Ghats”. However, the British government eventually took note of this revenue stream and ordered that all funds collected as offerings by the “Ganga-Putras” be deposited into the government treasury. Viewing this directive as an infringement upon their religious culture and traditional rights, the “Ganga-Putras” protested, garnering support from all castes across Banaras. Consequently, on April 28, 1805, a lawsuit was filed in court on behalf of the “Ganga-Putras” represented by Balram Tiwari, Bachchu Lal Chaubey, Babulal Pathak, Kamal Ram Shukla and Prasad Pandey to challenge the order. In their appeal, they highlighted that Manikarnika Ghat, Brahmnal Ghat and Jalsain Ghat had long been prominent pilgrimage sites in Banaras, having been made habitable by their ancestors who cleared the surrounding forests. Based on the presentation of valid documents and testimonies from prominent figures, the judge upheld the “Ganga-putras” rights over the “Ghats” and granted them the authority to receive the alms and offerings made at these “Ghats” and temples. Thus, the order issued by the British authorities was overturned. In Banaras, rituals and religious ceremonies at the Ghats and temples are conducted by priests. When pilgrims visit the city, these priests along with associates such as boatmen and vendors supplying fruits and flower garlands facilitate the entire process in exchange for “Daan-Dakshina” (Ritual offerings and fees). Since a single pilgrim cannot manage all these tasks independently, the rituals are completed through the collective cooperation of all these individuals at the Ganga Ghats.

Conclusion, the nature of Banaras's social structure viewed through the lens of social diversity is clearly reflected not only in the city itself but also among the people living on and around its various “Ghats”. These communities comprise individuals from diverse religions, castes, and sects, as well as people hailing from different regions, each bringing their own distinct cultural backgrounds. This level of social and cultural diversity vibrant and enduring since ancient times is rarely seen with such depth in other parts of India. it weaves together various cultures, serving as a prime example of “unity in diversity”.

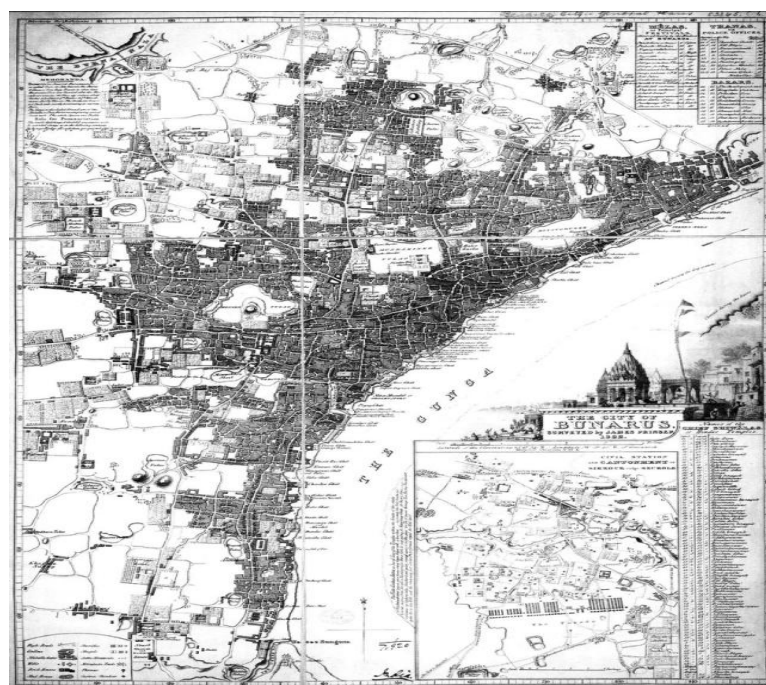


**Fig- 1, India and Varanasi Map**



**Fig- 2 Varanasi City Map**

[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-Varanasi-City-Region-in-India\\_fig-1,fig-2](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-Varanasi-City-Region-in-India_fig-1,fig-2)



**Fig-3, The Map of Varanasi drawn by James Prinsep in 1822**



**Fig4:Bharat Milap**



**Fig5: Culture of Banaras**

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