

From Bane to Boon: A Study of Electoral Success of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Contemporary Indian Politics

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Indian Politics has experienced a paradigm shift in the last two decades as far as its electoral performance is concerned. The political dominance of the Congress system was challenged with the emergence of coalition politics and later with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, also marking a significant change in the Indian electoral history. The BJP's rise shows an impressive story of tireless, continuous effort to achieve this gain, and that too by replacing the Congress, one of the oldest and strongest political stakeholders in Indian Politics. The BJP, at one point, often experienced political bane, has now successfully turned it into a boon and marked its political presence pan-India since 2014. The party, for the aforesaid reason, has maintained a few compromises in its ideological base, party leadership, and is now oriented towards an inclusive approach for several marginalised groups, which is an important segment of research for this paper. By using the content analysis method, this paper seeks to study the reasons behind the electoral rise of the BJP in contemporary Indian politics and examine whether the latter has a future roadmap to survive it. If yes, is the BJP going to maintain one-party dominance or a system like the Congress in Indian politics? For this purpose, a brief psephological reflection of India's General Elections since the 1990s, along with a comparative analysis of the electoral performance of both the Congress and the BJP.

Keywords: BJP, Congress, Coalition politics, Electoral Success, One Party Dominance

Indian democracy is known for its unique characteristics reflected in its political systems, governance style, and institutions. Unlike the homogenous Western society, India's plural society, consisting of a range of diverse religious and ethnic identities, makes its political system more complex and creates a more competitive political environment for its political parties. Factors like caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and patriarchy play a vital role in shaping the features of India's political parties and their functioning. Zoya Hasan (2002) has described the complexity of the Indian party system, which is based on the existing social heterogeneity has making it impossible for a single set of parties to emerge across the country. However, Indian Political parties bear the responsibility to maintain, sustain as well and deepen the Indian democracy. They have become so important in its political process that in their absence, it is hard to realise India's democratic success. They are responsible for maintaining checks and balances in the Indian democratic polity. The grounds for their emergence could be any, but one important role that they have to play is the

responsibility to articulate to their followers the concept and meaning of the broader community (Palombara & Weiner, 1966). Sirsikar and Fernandes (1984) argue that the party system is a by-product of the social system determined by two crucial variables, like social composition and economic development. Being the key building blocks of any political system, they provide a coordinating mechanism between several key actors like voters, candidates, ministers, representatives, and like in a polity.

Initially, the post-Independent India experienced one-party dominance in the form of a Congress System, encapsulated by all kinds of diversities, voices, and opposition. However, with the loosening of such a system due to the rise of new demands and aspirations, a coalitional contestation and governance emerged in India and is prominent to date. The transition of Congress from being a dominant party to experiencing a failure in India provided a huge political space to the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The BJP politically is neither too old nor too young, has successfully occupied this political gap with a hope of building a 'new India' by raising rhetorics like "*Achhe Din*", "*Congress Mukt Bharat*", etc., which has contributed to its political success both in 2014, 2019 and again in 2024 General Elections as well as in many state assemblies (Ziegfeld 2019). Due to this rise, it is observed that the Indian Political system has experienced a gradual shift from one-party dominance to a multi-party system, and then again, a U-turn to one-party dominance marked by the return of the BJP in 2019 (Chandhoke 2014). However, the uniqueness of the multiparty system of the Indian democracy embarks on a coalition journey for the parties existing here, which can be seen even to date. During the recent 2024 Lok Sabha elections, it has been proved that Coalition politics plays a quintessential role; therefore, it is almost impossible that any single party, be it the BJP, will secure a one-party dominant position, although it formed the government for a third consecutive term.

The Bharatiya Janata Party: A Brief Introduction

Some of the prominent leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L. K. Advani, and Murli Manohar Joshi of the Bharatiya Jana Sangha formed the Bharatiya Janata Party in April 1980. Due to its continuous defeat in the initial parliamentary elections, along with its links with the RSS, which believed in Hindutva, a major internal dispute arose, which caused certain splits leading to the birth of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Hindutva upholds the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, deserving no privilege and preferential treatment to minorities (Elst 1998), whereas the BJP often seems to deviate from the RSS line over the caste question. However, this idea is popularized by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which projects itself as a Hindu nationalist party, by emphasizing more on the acceptance of Hindu dominance and abandonment of the maintenance of religious personal laws (Agnes 2019).

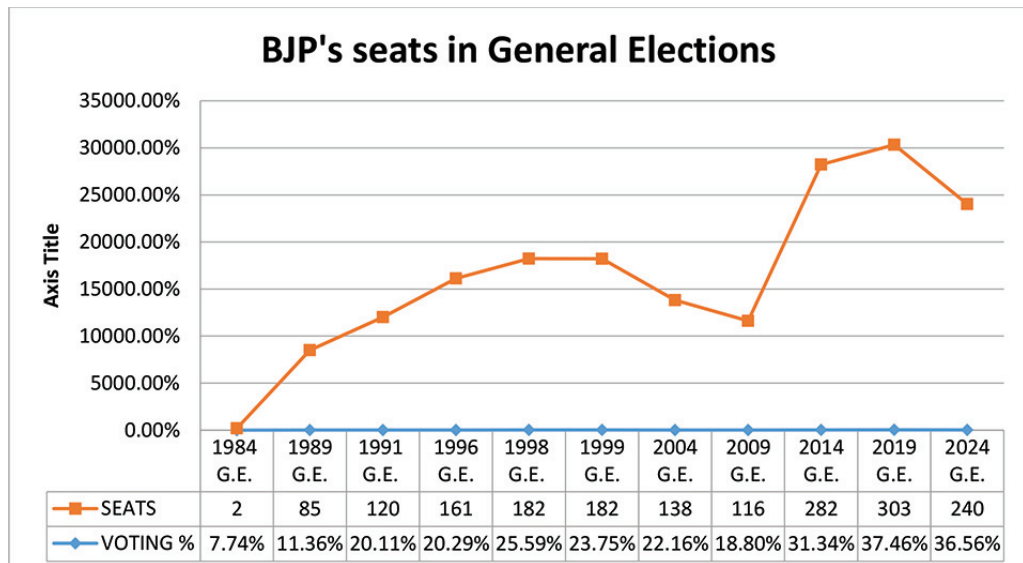
The BJP claims to be a champion of socio-religious cultural values of the country's Hindu majority, conservative social policies, and strong national defence (Kashyap, 2016). The party successfully increased its mass appeal and gained political success while capitalizing on anti-Muslim feeling and with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 (Elst 1998). Moreover, it is observed that the political expansion and rise of the BJP is accompanied by the tremendous rise of majoritarian politics since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, as it seeks to emphasize more on the domination

of the Hindu majority over the aliens and minority, mainly Muslims (T. B. Hansen 2019). Such majoritarianism is reflected through popularization of the Uniform Civil Code, the Abolition of Article 370, the Babri Mosque demolition, and building a Hindu Rashtra, which the BJP seeks to implement since its political birth.

Gain And Lose Game Of Politics: BJP's Electoral Performance Since The 1990s

Agendas like Anti-Congressism or *Congress Mukht Bharat*, *Ram Mandir*, *Hindu Rashtra*, etc., are important issues for the BJP over which it contests elections. Beginning with the 1984 general elections, the party managed to secure merely two seats with 7.68 per cent of votes, but later on, in the 1989 parliamentary elections, it secured 86 seats with 11.5 per cent of votes (BJP 2019). Such electoral gain further increased when the party emerged as the leading opposition party after winning 120 parliamentary seats in the 1991 elections. Moreover, the BJP also formed a 13-day government in 1996 after securing 161 seats, thus proving itself as the largest party in Parliament. This phenomenal rise of the BJP was branded as “Hindu fundamentalism”, Hindu “Nationalism” and some view it as Hindu “revivalism” (Ghosh 2000, 16).

Figure 1: Seats gained by BJP in various General Elections (eci.gov.in)



The BJP, being unable to realise electoral stability single-handedly, decided to form an alliance popularly known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), along with a few regional parties like AIADMK, Samata Party, Shiv Sena and some external support. Formed in 1998 to contest general elections, it managed to form the government. However, with the withdrawal of AIADMK's support, the government collapsed. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance again contested the general elections in 1999 with the support of some more regional parties and formed the government under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee, marking a significant trend

in Indian Politics. Since the end of the Indira Gandhi-Rajiv Gandhi phase, it happened for the first time that a pre-electoral alliance successfully obtained a clear majority with the return of an incumbent Prime Minister (Arora, 2002, p. 513). It was argued that such non-Congress consolidation became possible on the grounds of demand for less central intervention in state affairs, and because of a plea for more participation of the state in national governance (Arora, 2002, p. 518).

Nevertheless, this alliance did not give a very positive result for long, as the BJP-led NDA failed to win the 2004 general elections even after spending a lot on campaigns like 'India Shining' (Thakurta and Raghuraman 2004, 75). The Congress too found it difficult to make a comeback single-handedly, due to which it formed an important post-electoral alliance in 2004, called United Progressive Alliance, and managed to form the government as UPA-I (2004-09). This UPA contested even in the 2009 general elections, which reflected a continuation of government as UPA-II (2009-14). However, due to withdrawal of support by many regional and left parties over their 'unhappiness', 'serious corruption allegations like 2G over the Congress leaders' and 'minimal satisfaction' from the Centre, this UPA could not return to power in 2014 or even in 2019 general elections (Vaishnav 2019). Meanwhile, several swindles also contributed to the breakdown of the UPA coalition and the fragmentation of the Congress leaders from the party.

Despite fumbling the 2004 and 2009 nationwide elections, the BJP kept making electoral gains beyond its traditional strongholds in northern and western India (Vaishnav 2019, 29). Moreover, the NDA coalition led by the BJP re-emerged in the 2014 general elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Though the BJP alone won a maximum number of seats through which she could have survived, the coalition government continued, which further facilitated the expansion of the BJP in local and regional level politics on a pan-India level, and marked her victory in many of the state elections.

From Bane to Boon: Political Gain Since 2014

The majority mandate that the BJP gained in the 2014 general elections marked its return as a majority party in India, and also as a return of 'one-party dominance' in Indian politics (Chandhoke 2014). But this return was dramatically different from the previous Congress's one, in terms of their completely distinct ideologies, the rise of a charismatic leadership under Modi, which stood above and beyond his party, and an absence of any strong and viable opposition in the Parliament (Palshikar, Kumar and Lodha 2017). Moreover, it happened for the first time in India's electoral history that any non-Congress party has secured such a huge mandate on its own and successfully returned for its second tenure in 2019. Such features not only marked the BJP's national presence, but they also changed the nature of the party itself (Chandhoke 2014, 3).

This U-turn marked by the BJP did not happen suddenly, but has its roots in Indian politics itself. The Indian party system experienced a transformation in the 1980s itself. The BJP, following the Hindutva ideology with the project to build a majoritarian India, tried to fill the space vacated by the Congress party itself (Chandhoke 2014, 6). Nevertheless, the upsurge and continuation of power of the BJP is also marked by some accommodative modifications and changes made by the party (Ziegfeld 2019). For example, including marginalized groups like Dalits,

Scheduled Castes and Tribes, OBCs and Muslims to some extent.

It is rightly argued that the Congress Party's dalliance with religion and its willingness to intervene in disputes within and between religious communities created new opportunities for the BJP (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 11). Nevertheless, the BJP's 2014 electoral campaigns largely focused on issues like *Achhe Din*, *Gujarat Model*, and a corruption-free India. BJP's 2019 victory marked a milestone in India's electoral politics, as it was for the first time that a non-Congress party continued its dominance in the Central politics of India. To many, the 2019 mandate satisfied the claim that the BJP has now brought one-party dominance, though having different ideology and mode of functioning. This also became possible because of the absence of a viable opposition, which is fragmented and incapable of offering alternatives to the Indian masses (Chandhoke 2014).

Major Differences From The Congress

The notion of development and modernity experienced a major shift with a shift in ideology and governments. While for the Congress party and the Indian left parties, the promises of modernity and development had to be carried out along with the idea of social justice and inclusiveness of the subalterns (underprivileged and marginalized) of Indian society. Various schemes like MGNREGA, or OBC reservation in public institutions and like, fostered anger and resentment in the dominant upper and middle castes, which further resulted in the electoral decline of the Congress party (Palshikar, Kumar and Lodha 2017). This decline of the Congress created a 'political vacuum' that was filled by the electoral gains of the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi who stood for some mega-developmental schemes like Make in India under the garb of globalization to position India as an emergent modern superpower (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019).

Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot have analysed that the 2014 elections highlighted some major differences between the politics of the BJP and the Congress, aka previous regimes, mainly due to two unprecedented events-

- a. Firstly, the Hindu nationalist movement had never won an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha; and
- b. Secondly, such a movement is hardly known for its hostility to the personalization of power and for its collegial governance influenced by one politician, Narendra Modi (Chatterji, Hansen, & Jaffrelot, 2019).

Moreover, the glamourisation of Narendra Modi as '*Vikas Purush*' and the projection of the '*Gujarat Model*' as the future developmental model of India, the promises of "*Congress Mukht Bharat*" and "*Achhe din*" (free from corruption and appeasement politics), along with the rise of the neo-middle class, which not only appreciated Modi-led national populism but also his authoritarian leanings, resulted in the success and rise of the BJP in the present Indian politics (Chandhoke 2014).

Moreover, the BJP further seeks to amalgamate national pride with the global recognition of India as a world superpower, which fostered a sense of patriotism among its supporters (BJP 2014). It fostered a sense that any criticism of the party is the criticism of the country. The rise of the Majoritarian state under the leadership of Narendra Modi is also viewed as reflecting over India's present authoritarian turn, having delimited the ascendance of Hindu nationalist dominance in India through several state institutions and within civil and political society (Chatterji, Hansen, &

Jaffrelot, 2019, p. 12).

It was also observed that, unlike the previous Congress system, the BJP was able to achieve one-party dominance only because it had a strong, disciplined, and ideologically oriented cadre based on formations like the RSS (Chandhoke, 2014, p. 9). They were very clear in their agendas and programmes of building a *Hindu Rashtra* from the very beginning. However, due to the compulsions of multiparty coalition politics in India, the BJP too sometimes seems to adopt and agree on different strategies of its ally partners. Such clarity of agendas was somehow blurred in the Congress party, as it had a belief in overshadowing differences under its umbrella.

Moreover, the Congress's regime was often marked by a loosely knit coalition, where regional parties and their other allies had a bargaining space, which the BJP seeks to avoid (Chandhoke, 2014, p. 10). The Congress managed to successfully encapsulate differences, agitations and opposition in a somewhat democratic manner, which is absent in the BJP's dominance. Even its allies find it hard to express their resistance against the party or any policy of it, nor does such resistance seriously concern the BJP. The disparate coalition of Bihar's NDA coalition explains this narrative, especially the post-electoral breakup of BJP and JD (U) and replacement of power sharing in Bihar's politics (Ziegfeld 2019). The BJP also benefited from the tremendous discontent present in the previous regimes.

Return of the One-Party Dominance or Coalition Continued?

The BJP by now has become a pan-India party, expanding its base in almost all Indian states, with a neo-liberal agenda of 'minimum government maximum governance' (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019). This return further marked a U-turn in India's electoral politics, which brought not only significant changes in the mode of governance but also influenced the institutional structures and society as a whole.

The populist rise of the BJP, owing to such factors, has created a debate over whether India is moving towards illiberal ethnic democracy, whereby the illiberal democracy is reflected through the suppression of civil rights and liberties and a continuous use of violence and vigilantism (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019). Nevertheless, such a populist rise in Indian politics has happened during the imposition of the National Emergency in 1975-77 by Indira Gandhi, and in the present Modi regime, after 2014 onwards. The 2014 general elections not only enhanced the populist politics, but also gave a rise to the majoritarian politics in India, to which Thomas Blom Hansen (2019) has described as 'India's transition to an 'Illiberal Democracy' which has all the possibilities to diminish civil liberties and intellectual freedom (T. B. Hansen 2019, 19).

For Yogendra Yadav, the rise of the BJP to power and a consistent increase in its vote share is accompanied by a three-dimensional expansion in the 1990s, which is,

1. Firstly, a geographic expansion beyond its north Indian Hindi heartland states and Gujarat and Maharashtra to states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.
2. Secondly, in social terms, the BJP is no longer an urban bania-brahmin party, as it has developed a formidable rural base extending well into the lower OBCs and some adivasis.

3. Thirdly, in political and ideological terms, it has expanded to win the confidence of various allies who have little patience with its Hindutva ideology and thus has formed alliances with parties like DMK, JD (U), and others (Yadav, 1999).

Contours of India's Political Trajectories: Heading Towards Where?

The comeback of the BJP both in 2014, 2019 and again in 2024 India's general election has proved that the party is quite capable as well as successful in maintaining its hegemony in contemporary Indian politics. Suhas Palshikar has analysed that this newfound hegemony of the BJP rests on two pillars- elections and ideology (Vaishnav 2019, 17-18).

- a. Electorally, the party has become the central pole of Indian politics, and is effortlessly fighting both the state and national elections (either as the leading opposition or as the ruling party), which has compelled all other parties, including the Congress, to make a common anti-BJP front.
- b. Secondly, the party has a success in exerting its ideological dominance as against the "western-outsider secular mindset", by mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist views as a routine element of everyday Indian politics, also called as "*Banal Hindutva*" by scholars like John Harris, Craig Jeffrey and Stuart Corbridge (Vaishnav 2019, 18).

Such two consecutive political gains of the BJP seek to determine the contours of India's political future. The Modi 3.0 factor seems to strengthen the idea that the BJP is not going to lose the battle in the forthcoming elections. However, this Modi-led BJP factor has raised a doubt over the BJP becoming a one-man party or whether the party holds supremacy above any individual. It has raised several internal contradictions within the BJP, which managing it has become a serious challenge.

The 2024 Electoral Sage and INDIA versus NDA: A Resurgence of Regional Parties

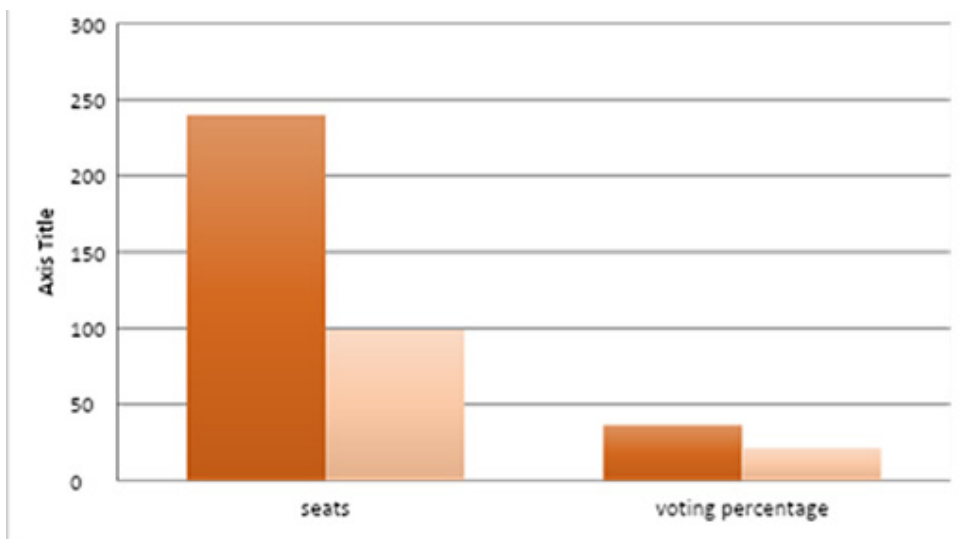
Given the recent electoral performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, it was proved that no single party in a multiparty India can rule single-handedly. Coalition Dharma has become a must in Indian politics. The BJP's dream of returning as a single dominant party with a slogan of "*Abki baar 400 paar*" was shattered, and the opposition got a stronghold. The Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc saw a rise by bagging over 205 seats, a very close to form the government, as against the seats of NDA bloc which bagged 293 seats (including JDU and TDP), merely a few seats more to form the government (Hindu 2024).

Moreover, INDIA also experienced a resurgence in Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP effort and was successful in establishing the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple (EPW 2024). The famous BJP leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, once said, "*Dilli ka Rasta UP hoke hi jata hai*" (Maheshwari 2022), as the state secures the maximum number of Lok Sabha seats. Based on this statement, the BJP's electoral survival seems uncertain in future. Overall, it was observed that the opposition has some major responsibilities in reviving itself, while on the other hand, the ruling party has experienced a relative decline as compared to its previous regimes.

The 2024 Lok Sabha verdict also paved the way for the resurgence of regional parties by showing how their importance matters much if either bloc has to form the

government. This verdict also returned their bargaining powers, especially to parties like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh and Janata Dal (United) of Bihar (Firstpost 2024). It was presumed that due to his often switching nature with political allies, Nitish Kumar and his party JD (U) were going to experience a political death in this election, which was, of course, proved wrong with the results. To many, the 2024 elections provided a success to the Opposition parties to come together responsibly; and they must realize that federalism requires an equitable sharing of power at the Centre, and not is not merely limited to fiscal, financial and cultural rights (Bose 2024).

Figure 2: Electoral Performance of BJP and Congress in 2024 Lok Sabha Elections



As far as the voters are concerned, many scholars found that in the 2024 elections, the real winners are India's democracy provided by the force of the voters (Kohli 2024). Due to its incapability in creating jobs, the BJP's electoral appeal appeared to be shrunk significantly, even in constituencies like Faizabad which house the Ram Temple. Even the RSS found this verdict as a result of arrogance, and the party must learn from it (Naqvi 2024).

Conclusion

The role of Indian political parties cannot be undermined in the functioning and deepening of Indian Democracy. Given the multicultural and plural society of India, their role becomes even more important as far as the development of several groups is concerned. No matter what kind of Ideology they believe in, they bear the task of maintaining the liberal democracy of India by addressing various communities at the policy level. If they fail to do so, the chances of their political survival drop. Due to India's multiculturalism, political parties tend to represent diverse interests; therefore realizing the need to engage in coalition building both at the national and at the state levels. They tend to draw more sections of society into the arena of politics and seek to provide avenues both to the elites and the weaker sections of society to

manage public affairs. Moreover, the emergence of new parties embodying the interests of several disadvantaged sections and the deepening of the democratic process are observed.

Moreover, the role of Indian voters can also not be ignored because of their demands and aspirations; many new parties emerge and survive, and experience a worse demise. The mandate and demands of Indian voters play an active role in shaping the nature and characteristics of the party system in India. Political modifications and ideological compromises done by many political parties, including the BJP and the Congress, nowadays reflect such characteristics. Furthermore, with new developments and a huge social outreach in the Digital Age, people do not act merely as voters, but as everyday public expecting quick and immediate responses and actions over concerned issues. The party that is capable of addressing their concern in minutes will experience a political gain.

Although the BJP's return in 2019 and many state elections is viewed as the return of one-party dominance of something like the BJP System, the real and immediate challenge that remains is to maintain it. In addition, the BJP's dominance is very different from that of the Congress, due to a difference in their ideologies and approaches towards the diverse society of India. The Congress too had tried to rejuvenate its outreach among the masses through major campaigns like *Bharat Jodo Yatra* and *Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra*, through which it managed to secure 99 seats in the recent 2024 Lok Sabha elections. In addition, after having such a majority in the Lok Sabha, the new BJP, which was presumed to be capable enough to form a government on its own, could not do so without having any pre-/post-poll alliance. Forging a coalition has become a compulsion in a Multiparty Indian democracy, given its heterogeneous and diverse nature of Indian society. Various segments of voters, including minorities, have to be served and addressed in the welfare policies if the BJP wants to survive the Indian politics for a long time.

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