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## CONTOURS OF CHANGE: STRUCTURAL SHIFTS AND ISSUES IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

Indian democracy, born after the end of British colonial rule, is the largest and most complex democracy in the world and has been undergoing various tests. While India's constitutional principles emphasize popular sovereignty, socialism, social justice, secularism, and the rule of law, its operational dynamics often indicate deep structural changes. This article examines the nature of the changes taking place in the structure of Indian democracy and points out the forces that exist within it and the emerging challenges. Issues such as dynastic politics, party centralization, defections, criminalization, identity-based mobilization, unequal representation, corruption, and socio-economic inequality are analysed. It also argues that Indian democracy is still evolving, undergoing changes including institutional reforms and renewed civic engagement.

**Key Words:** Democracy, Structural shifts, Dynastic Politics, Defections, Political Instability, Unequal Political Representation, Economic Inequality, Corruption, Criminalisation of Politics

### INTRODUCTION

Democratic rule in India formally began on 26 January 1950 when India became a sovereign democratic republic. The preamble of the Constitution, as desired by the people of India, affirms popular sovereignty and commits the state to equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity. Furthermore, the Constitution of India institutionalizes democracy through free and fair universal suffrage, fundamental rights in Part III, an independent judiciary, the division of powers between the Centre and the States, and periodic elections under Article 324. The Constitution also provides Directive Principles of State Policy under part IV out of the belief that political democracy should be complemented by economic democracy. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments of 1992 further strengthened democracy by empowering local self-government institutions. Even though it is a strong democracy, there have been visible changes in its structure and in the values enshrined in the Constitution. Understanding these transformations is essential for assessing its current state.

### ENDURING STRENGTHS OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Despite its size and diversity, Indian democracy has always demonstrated remarkable resilience. First, electoral participation among Dalits, Adivasis, rural people, women, and marginalized communities, as indicated by voting figures in recent years, is often higher than that of urban elites. This points to a rapidly growing political awareness among rural populations beyond the traditional power structures of the past. Second, the 2024 general elections, with 977.97 million registered voters, marked the largest peaceful electoral process in the world. The institutional capacity of Election Commission of India to successfully conduct elections in India's diverse social context has been discussed and acknowledged globally. Third, India has witnessed peaceful transfers of power even in highly competitive political settings. Furthermore, democratic methods such as negotiation, coalition building, and compromise still exist as mechanisms for government formation. These strengths suggest that the procedural core of democracy remains intact, although structural distortions raise serious concerns.

### TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES: FROM MASS MOBILIZATION TO ELECTORAL MACHINES

A major structural change has taken place in the nature of political parties. Classical mass parties, rooted in consistent grassroots engagement, have become increasingly election focused organizations in recent years. Voting patterns in the



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2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections show that many of the dominant national parties receive support from only a small proportion of the total electorate. In 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party won 303 seats, securing 37.7% of the valid votes. The Indian National Congress, securing about 20% of the valid votes with 52 seats. In 2024, despite a decline in the number of seats, the BJP remained the largest party with 239 seats and 36.93% of the valid votes. Its vote share remained at 24% of the total electorate, showing that majority in the house depends on the support of a limited proportion of the registered voters. The Congress improved to 99 seats, winning 21.4% of the valid votes. Bahujan Samaj Party contested in election widely but failed to win any seats which indicates that scattered votes do not easily translate into representation.

In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), the emergence of leaders like Nitish Kumar and N. Chandrababu Naidu as key figures in government formation highlights how coalition politics, which has become a hallmark of Indian politics, has increased bargaining power among regional parties. Although the BJP was the single largest party in the Lok Sabha election, NDA government formation was not possible without the support of the TDP and JD(U). While coalition politics reflects federal diversity, over-reliance on shifting coalitions is undermining long-term policy stability. The following table reveals a competitive but fragmented party system, where each party's performance depends more on vote concentration than on vote share.

**Performance of National Parties (17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election)**

Party Name	Candidates Contested	Won	Votes Secured by Party	% of Votes Secured (Over Total Electors)	% of Votes Secured (Over Total Valid Votes Polled)
AITC	62	22	2,49,29,330	2.73	4.1
BSP	383	10	2,22,46,501	2.44	3.66
BJP	436	303	22,90,76,879	25.12	37.7
CPI	49	2	35,76,184	0.39	0.59
CPI (M)	69	3	1,07,44,908	1.18	1.77
INC	421	52	11,94,95,214	13.1	19.67
NCP	34	5	85,00,331	0.93	1.4

Total Electors in the Country (including Service - Electors) -911950734

Total Valid Votes Polled in the Country (including Service-Votes) -607650051

Source: (ECI, 2019)

**Performance of National Parties (18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election)**

Party Name	Contested	Won	Votes Secured by Party	% of Votes Over Total Electors	% of Votes Over Total Valid Votes Polled
AAP	22	3	71,47,800	0.73	1.12
BSP	488	0	1,31,53,830	1.35	2.06
BJP	440	239	23,59,74,144	24.13	36.93
CPI(M)	52	4	1,13,42,553	1.16	1.78
INC	328	99	13,67,58,952	13.98	21.4
National People's Party	3	0	4,17,930	0.04	0.07

Total Electors (including Service-Electors): 977965560

Total Valid Votes Polled (including Service-Votes): 638990692

Source: (ECI, General Election to Lok Sabha 2024 - Statistical Reports, 2024)



## CENTRALIZATION OF LEADERSHIP AND DYNASTIC POLITICS

Regional parties have strengthened India's federal democracy, although many show centralized leadership structures. The trend of dominant party leadership is evident in several states. The split in Shiv Sena after the rebellion led by Eknath Shinde highlighted internal conflicts over the authority of the Thackeray family. The Bahujan Samaj Party remains closely linked to Mayawati. In West Bengal, the All India Trinamool Congress revolves around Mamata Banerjee, while in Odisha the Biju Janata Dal has long been identified with Naveen Patnaik. A similar pattern exists in Tamil Nadu with the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Dynastic politics also strengthens power concentration. Data from the Association for Democratic Reforms shows that about 21% of current MPs and MLAs belong to political families.

### National Overview of MPs, MLAs, and MLCs with Dynastic Backgrounds

Elections	Number of Sitting MPs, MLAs, and MLCs	Number of MPs, MLAs and MLCs with Dynastic Backgrounds	% of Dynastic Background
State Assembly Elections - MLAs	4091	816	20%
Lok Sabha Elections - MPs	542	166	31%
Rajya Sabha Elections - MPs	224	47	21%
State Legislative Council Elections - MLCs	346	77	22%
Total	5203	1106	21%

Source: (ADR, 2025)

The lack of intra-party democracy and dynastic politics pose a major challenge to democracy. When political power is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals and becomes family based, opportunities for new ideas and emerging leaders in politics are limited. Too often, politics is seen not as a service but as an inheritance. Democracy thrives best through leadership based on merit and public trust, open competition, and internal debate. When others are listened to and opportunities are shared, politics becomes a reflection of the aspirations of the people, not a continuation of family traditions.

### DEFLECTIONS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Political defections have long shaped India's experience with political instability, particularly during the fragmented coalition era between 1967 and the late 1990s. Frequent floor-crossing in state assemblies led to repeated government collapses, prompting the 52nd Constitutional Amendment (1985) and the insertion of the Tenth Schedule to curb defections. While the Anti-Defection Law reduced individual party switching, it also strengthened party leadership control and encouraged new strategies such as mass resignations and engineered mergers (Nikolenyi, 2009; Nikolenyi, 2014). From 1957 to 1967, the Congress party remained the chief beneficiary of defections, losing 98 legislators but gaining 419 through party switching. The trend intensified after 1967 symbolised by Haryana MLA Gaya Lal's repeated party changes, which popularised the phrase "*Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram*" and between 1967–1971 about 142 defections occurred in Parliament and 1,969 in state assemblies; from 1967–1983, nearly 2,700 state-level defections were recorded, with 15 defectors later becoming chief ministers (Thakur, 1995; Singh & Saxena, 2003; Nikolenyi, 2009).

In recent years, several state governments in India have fallen due to coordinated defections rather than individual floor-crossing. In Arunachal Pradesh (2016), Pema Khandu and 42 Congress MLAs shifted allegiance, eventually aligning with the BJP and collapsing the Congress government; in Karnataka (2019), the resignation of 17 coalition MLAs brought down the JD(S)–Congress government; in Madhya Pradesh (2020), Jyotiraditya Scindia and 22 Congress MLAs defected, toppling the Kamal Nath ministry; and in Maharashtra (2022), Eknath Shinde's rebellion with nearly 40 Shiv Sena MLAs led to a



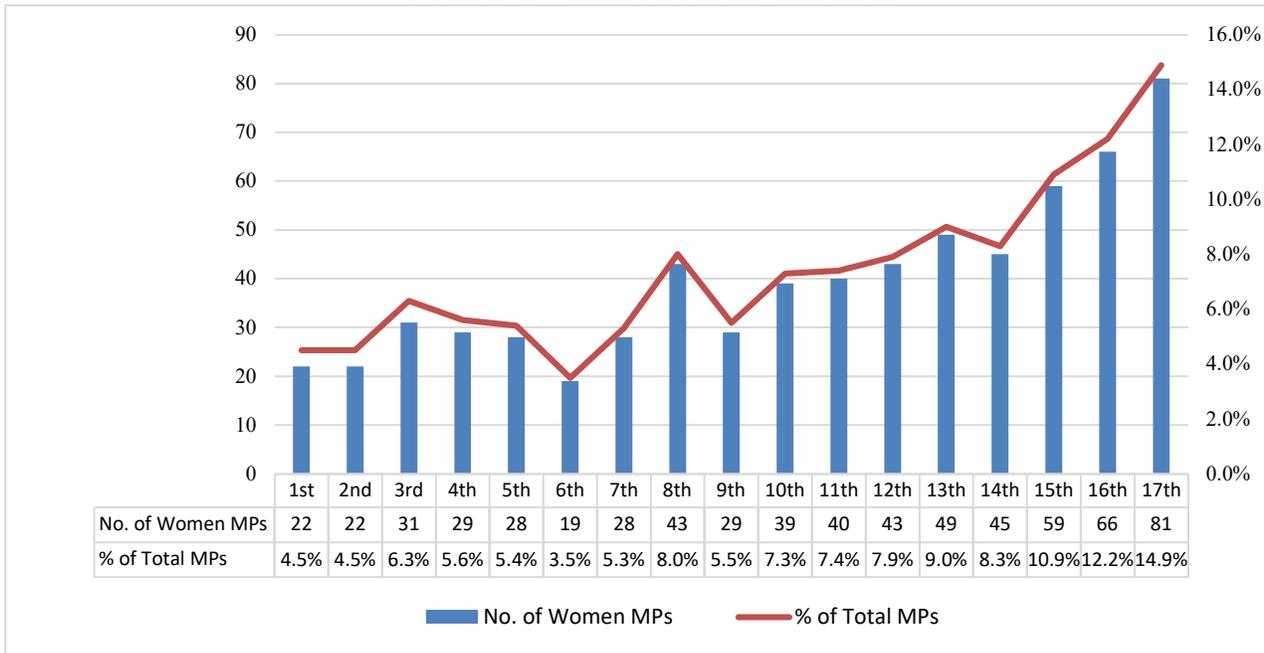
change in government. A similar pattern continued in 2023 when Ajit Pawar led a split in the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) with a large group of MLAs joining the ruling alliance in Maharashtra.

Defections related issues today often trigger judicial intervention and reshape government formation without fresh electoral mandates, especially in closely contested state assemblies (Guruvayurappan, 2023; Khosla & Vaishnav, 2024). Thus, rather than eliminating instability, the law has transformed its form - shifting Indian politics from open defections to more institutionalised realignments. Defections may reflect ideological shifts and violates the rights of voters who cast their ballots believing that candidates will follow the same political ideology. Real political stability depends on political integrity and respect for the people’s mandate. Democracy survives not just on numbers, but on honesty, responsibility, and commitment to public trust.

**UNEQUAL POLITICAL REPRESENTATION**

As of 2024, women constitute 13.63% of the Lok Sabha and 17% of the Rajya Sabha (ECI, 2024; GoI, 2024). The states which have more than 10% women law makers are Bihar 10.70%, Hariyana 10%, Jharkhand 12.35% Punjab 11.11%, Rajasthan 12%, Uttarakhand 11.43%, UP 11.66%, WB 13.70% Delhi 11.43%. According to the Data AP, Assam, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, MP, Maharashtra, Manipur, Odisha, Sikkim, TN, Telangana, have less than 10% Women legislators. The average number of women MLAs in Assemblies across the nation accounts for only 8% (India, 2022). Despite being the largest democracy in the world, India ranks 151<sup>th</sup> (2024 General Election) globally in terms of women’s representation in national parliaments (IPU, 2026)

Number of women MPs in the Lok Sabha



Source: (Research, 2019)

The figure shows that women’s presence in the Lok Sabha has grown gradually. Representation remained very low in the early decades constituting around 4 to 6% and even fell to 3.5% in 1977. From the 1980s onward, the numbers slowly improved. A sharper rise is visible after 2009, reaching 81 women members (14.9%) in 2019. Making reservation for women in politics and election a reality along with strengthening political will from the part of political parties will help to ensure greater representation for women.



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## POOR VOTER TURNOUT

Elections in India are a grand celebration of democracy, where millions of people choose their leaders through their right to vote. Poor voter turnout remains a serious concern in India despite an overall rise in participation from 58.17% in 2009 to 66.1% in the 2024 Indian general election. Although more people are voting than ever before, turnout varies widely across states and union territories. Low voter turnout in India is often linked to everyday struggles that make politics feel distant. Factors such as urban apathy, climate change, and migration are contributing to low voter turnout in many large states (Menon & Rassendren, 2022). And while awareness campaigns by the Election Commission of India have increased voter registration, uneven political engagement, socio-economic problems, and inequalities still contribute to low voter turnout in many parts of the country. But strong local political awareness, high literacy, vibrant public debate and active community networks can encourage people to vote.

Lok Sabha election voter turnout

Lok Sabha election	
Year	%
2009	58.17
2014	66.40
2019	67.40
2024	66.1

Source: ECI Reports

## MAJORITY INFLUENCE AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

At present two important concerns shape current debates on Indian democracy: identity-based dominance and the growing concentration of wealth. The concept of ethno-democracy, explained by Sammy Smooha, describes a system where democratic institutions function formally, but one ethnic or religious majority enjoys structural advantage (Smooha, 2002). India is not constitutionally structured as an ethno-democratic state; the Preamble upholds secularism, Articles 14 -15 ensure equality and non-discrimination, Articles 25-28 guarantee religious freedom, Articles 29-30 protect minority rights, and the Eighth Schedule recognises linguistic diversity. Yet increasing identity-based mobilization and majority cultural assertions have raised debates about how these constitutional values operate in practice.

At the same time, economic inequality has sharpened concerns about a drift toward “Pluto-Democracy,” (Giglioli, 2012) where wealth influences political power. Although India is the world’s fourth-largest economy, the top 1% hold 40.1% of national wealth, while the bottom 50% own only 6.4%. The top 10% earn 57.7% of national income (Anand, 2025). India ranked 105th in the Global Hunger Index 2024 and 102nd in 2025 (GHI, 2025), highlighting gaps between growth and social justice. Together, these trends suggest that the challenge before Indian democracy lies not in its constitutional design, but in ensuring that equality- both social and economic.

Economic inequality and majority influence and are not merely statistics, policies, or systems. Rather, it is about people. While most voices shape economic preferences without reflection, inequality appears natural rather than created, quietly woven into the fabric of everyday life. When collective consciousness and empathy grow among people, justice becomes a shared responsibility rather than a private desire, and that is where real change begins. Therefore, economic inequality remains an issue that needs to be addressed through a moral and social commitment.

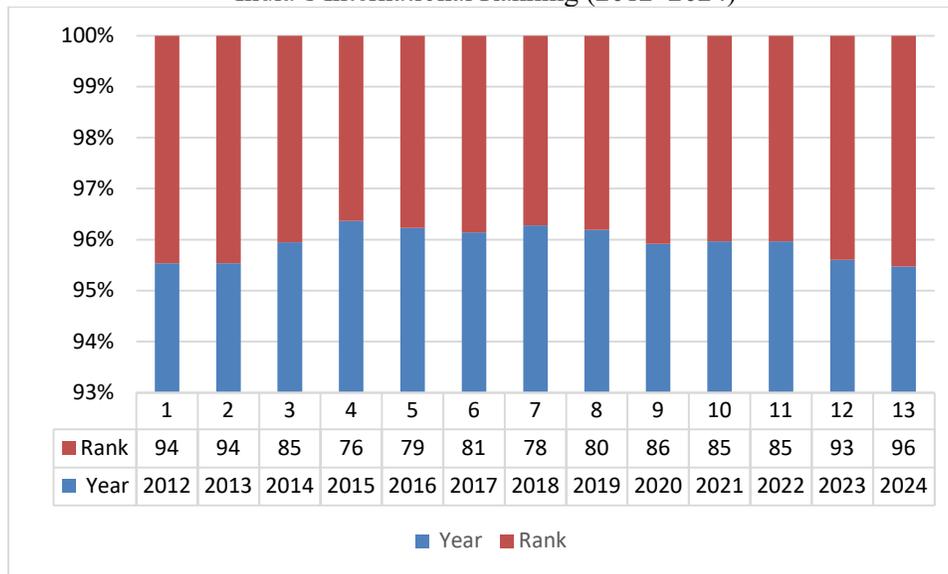
## CORRUPTION

According to the World Bank, corruption is a major obstacle to socio economic development. It slows down economic growth, weakens democratic institutions, and erodes public trust (Loya, 2005). Corruption undermines good governance and undermines democratic values. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals that the level of corruption across the world is stagnant. According to the CPI, India is ranked 96th out of 180 countries in the list of



corrupt nations. Denmark topped Transparency International's CPI rankings in 2024, followed by Finland and Singapore. However, South Sudan and Somalia were at the bottom of the rankings, coming in at 180th and 179th positions, respectively. Studies and reforms to ensure governance transparency and accountability in India suggest that while measures such as the e-governance platforms, Right to Information Act 2005, and social accountability mechanisms such as social auditing can reduce some forms of corruption, their success depends on creative citizen engagement and deep institutional commitment (Peisakhin, 2012; Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). Transparency alone is not a cure; it must be accompanied by enforceable accountability and political will (Mugellini, Della , Colagrossi, Isenring, & Killias, 2021).

India's International Ranking (2012–2024)



Source: (International, 2026)

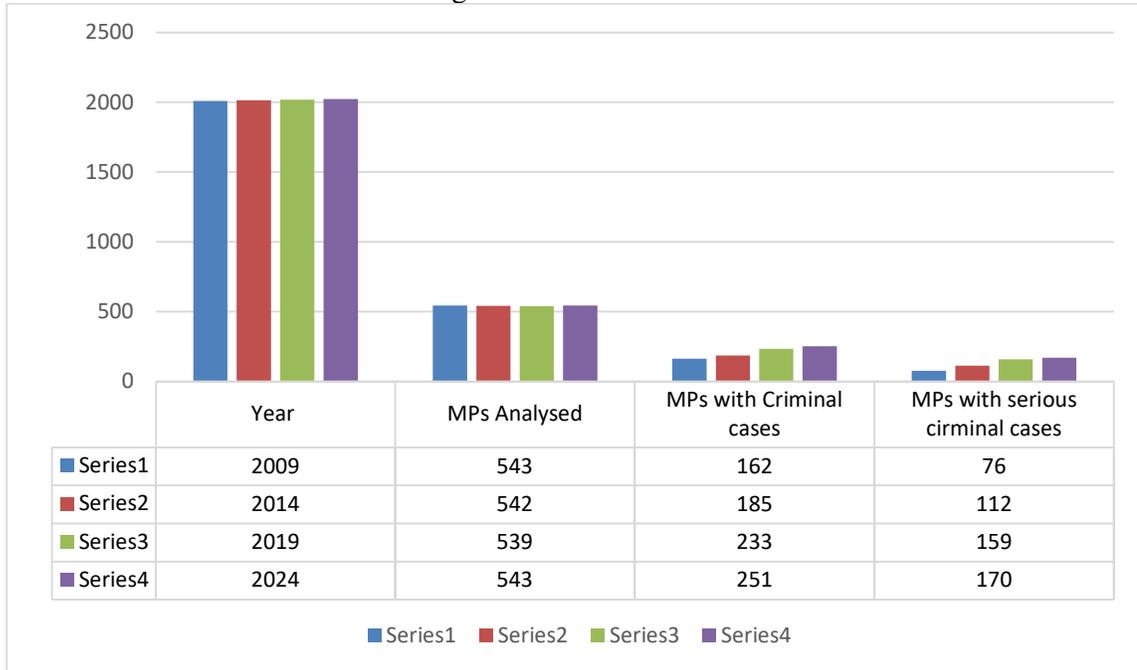
### CRIMINALISATION OF POLITICS

The increasing amount of Criminalisation of politics is one of the major threats to the working of democracy. Generally, it means the direct entry of criminals into the political parties & legislature through elections. It makes democracy more disorder and disrupted because here lawbreakers become lawmakers. Because of criminalisation there has been a steady erosion of democratic values in the society.

Out of the 543 who won the Lok Sabha elections 251 (46%) of them have declared criminal cases against them. While 170 (31%) of MPs have declared serious criminal cases which include cases of Murder, rape, attempt to murder, kidnapping etc. Of the 240 winning candidates of the BJP 94 (39 percent) (18th Lok Sabha) have declared criminal cases, according to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), which further said 49 (49 percent) of the Congress' 99 winning candidates have declared criminal cases and 21 (45 percent) of the Samajwadi Party's 37 candidates face criminal charges. From the TMC, which won 29 seats, 13 (45%) declared criminal cases against them and 13 (59 percent) of the DMK's 22, 8 (50 per cent) of the TDP's 16, and five (71 percent) of the Shiv Sena's seven winning candidates have declared criminal cases (Ranjan, 2024). Since 2009 there is an increase of 55% in the number of MPs with declared criminal cases. Judicial interventions such as Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms (2002) and Lily Thomas v. Union of India (2013) have strengthened transparency and disqualification norms, yet the trend persists.



MPs Facing Criminal cases - 2009 to 2024



Source: (Ranjan, 2024)

The increasing criminalization of Indian politics cannot be eliminated by a single sudden reform. It requires a concerted effort from the people, the courts, and the political parties. Criminal cases against elected representatives in the country should be disposed of expeditiously by setting up special courts. Those charged with serious criminal offences should be strictly prohibited by law from continuing as public representatives. While fielding a person for election, political parties should consider not only the person’s ability to win elections but also his honesty. When citizens demand electoral transparency and refuse to support candidates with criminal backgrounds, the current political culture of criminalisation of politics begins to change. Democracy does not only survive on periodic elections; it also survives on the trust of the people.

**CONCLUSION**

Indian democracy is going through a transitional phase, witnessing structural changes in the political and socio-economic spheres. The rise of dynastic politics, the defection of candidates for political gains and vested interests, crimes committed by candidates, and the entrenched corruption in many areas reflect institutional pressures, but they also indicate the competition for power and wealth in a democracy. Political instability and the lack of equal representation of women and men in politics expose the cracks in the system, while growing economic inequality among different sections of society tests the moral promise of inclusiveness in democracy. Civil society, voters, various institutions, the judiciary, the Election Commission, and others continue to reflect on and respond to the above democratic pressures. The real challenge here is not survival, but the renewal of the democratic system and its promises. This means strengthening transparency, reforming anti-defection mechanisms, ensuring political participation beyond elite families, and ensuring that current economic growth leads to social justice and participation for all.



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