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# From Women Empowerment to Abandonment: Lessons from the Pink Auto Initiatives in Assam

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**Abstract**

Gender and transport-oriented projects like Bongaigaon, Assam's ('pink autos') were initiated in the promise of safety, empowerment as well as inclusivity in public transportation. Conceived as both a source of employment for women and as safer alternative to ensure security of female commuters, these initiatives were initially heralded as a key reference for gender-responsive urban mobility. But as the program ultimately collapsed, it also exposed the embedded social, cultural and structural obstacles blocking its lasting success.

This paper investigates why gendered mobility intervention fails, even with good intentions. Adopting qualitative and exploratory methods, this article reflects on field data from women auto drivers, local users of transport head load workers and officials of the transport department in Bongaigaon to establish women's political sense along with references from primary material derived from policy papers, government reports about traffic congestion, incomplete roads in the city, different academic assessments and newspaper articles. Findings indicate problems other than operation problems of this program were based on the structure of the two cities under question. many more serious problems could be associated with its basis of the prevalent patriarchal socii norms, to lack of institutional commitment, financial limitations, and lack of policies and continuity of other ways.

The article argues that symbolic programs such as pink autos are unlikely to have long-lasting impact unless embedded in broader structures of socio-cultural bias and alternative arrangements for providing economic, infrastructural, and policy support over the long term. By conducting a critical analysis of this case study, the paper seeks to contribute to the wider debate on gender-sensitive inclusive and sustainable transport system in India.

**Keywords:** gender-inclusive transport, sustainability, pink autos, women empowerment, urban mobility, social barriers

## 1. Introduction:

In recent past, the problem of gender equity in public transportation has been given global attention. Recently, the importance of recognizing women's right to safe and equitable mobility as a critical dimension of inclusive development has gained momentum among

governments, development actors, and urban planners (UN Women, 2021). It has prompted a spate of initiatives in India — from women-only metro coaches and buses to female-driven taxi services— that aim both to make travel safer and expand job prospects for Indian women. A local innovation, the pink auto rickshaw project in Assam's Bongaigaon tapped into the national slogan for "women-led development" given by Betu Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign (Ministry of Women and Child Development,2019).

The pink auto project was introduced with much fanfare as a win-win model – to provide livelihood for women and safe public transport to women commuters. The fundamental objective was to challenge gender stereotypes by getting women into non-traditional employment and work towards economic independence. It initially received considerable media attention, with multiple women taking driving lessons, getting auto permits and opening the service at major routes in Bongaigaon. But in no time the project ran into rough weather -frequency of off-road vehicles became maximum, most drivers abandoned plying their vehicles and ridership plunged phenomenally (Das 2020).

The collapse of the initiative poses basic questions: What caused an idea with obvious social value, and general public support, to crash so quickly? What does this tell us about the interrelation between gender, mobility and sustainability in India's small towns?

The current paper aims to explore these issues while reflecting on the social and cultural, structural and institutional reasons why the program collapsed. They argue that, though gender-sensitive transport is necessary, it too often ignores other connections to sustainability—economic viability, social acceptance, and ongoing institutional attention.

Overall, the literature here suggests that gender-sensitive transport systems take root only when social inclusion is institutionally supported and integrated into policy, long-term planning process, training provision and inclusiveness (Anand & Tiwari; 2006: Peters; 2013). Experience in India, however, suggests that most of these schemes are symbolic or unsustainable, especially so in smaller towns where patriarchal values still seep in (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

The pink auto experiment in Bongaigaon is a microcosm of this larger national problem – the chasm between the verbalisation of policy and the level of implementation. the fact of lack of success of this project points to lessons of importance regarding the major principle of making both financially viable, socially acceptable and institutionally supported women-oriented transport throughout country.

The present work, takes a case study attitude, taking the field observations and literature review, in regard to the apparent operational problems referred to above and the subtle socio–cultural relationships obtaining which brought about this quiet failure.

## 2. Literature Review:

### 2.1 Gender and Transport; a Global Overview:

Internationally, the gender and transport nexus has become a major concern of sustainable urban development. it has been long recognised amongst no few numbers of experts of the subject that women travel differently from men, on account of the divisions of labour based on gender, fear of personal security and obligations for caring for others (Anand & Tiwari, 2006; Peters, 2013). Females often have more short, multimodal local trips that serve several needs—work, caring and house while travelling being important (World Bank 2020).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular SDG 5: Gender Equality, and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, highlight the importance of inclusive growth that make access to mobility fair (UN Women, 2021). However, worldwide reports consistently state that women are a minority in the transport labour market and as passengers, especially in developing countries (ITF, 2019).

In Latin America, in the case of "Women on Wheels" in Mexico City, the manner of the manner in which some such growing attempts are made to empower women drivers in running the system, encounter lack of infrastructure, institutionalism capability Peterson (2013). Over in Kenya, too, women drivers experienced discrimination and harassment in the matatu industry were reported to dropout from work at a high rate (Ngatia & Mitullah, 2020). Such situations as have just been illustrated, point to a fact, that is to say: such attempts, if they be based purely on vision or picture making, and not on structural security be such or otherwise, eventually decay.

Feminist urban theorists maintain that sustainable transport cannot be viewed on its operational aspect merely of providing physical access, but should also restructure the power relations obtaining and take into consideration the gendering of the factors of insecurity, participation and decision–making (Levy, 2013; Grieco, 2013). In other words, women's mobility sustainability is as much a matter of social transition as it is one of infrastructure.

**2.2 Indian context: Gender, Mobility and Symbolism**

The topic of women's mobility is now gaining traction in Indian policy and academic discourse. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) specifically highlighted gender-responsive design in public transportation systems under the Smart Cities Mission (MoHUA, 2021). However, research indicates that such interventions are often tokenistic – meaning all-women's compartments, pink buses or women-driven taxi services that do not account for long-term economic and social sustainability (Kumar & Singh, 2021; Tiwari, 2019).

While the National Urban Transport Policy (2014) which promotes an inclusive yet balanced planning, weak coordination between urban local bodies and transport authorities is evident in their disposal measures on ground (Pande & Mitra, 2020). Furthermore, women involvement in public transport governance is still low and mostly decision-making is male-centered (Kalra, 2022).

One common critique is that "women-centric" projects are only as visible as they are viable. For example, in Delhi, the women-only "pink buses" were successful in uplifting feelings of safety at first but faced issues such as route rationalization and running costs (Pande & Mitra, 2020). The same was the case for programs that trained women as taxi drivers in cities like Pune and Bengaluru but witnessed a high rate of exit due to insufficient financial support and lack of institutional mentorship (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

These failures reflect those from around the world, and highlight that without affordability, community support or ongoing policy advocacy gendered transport policy becomes performative and not transformative.

**2.3 Socio-Cultural and Structural Barriers:**

"But, apart from this logistics and funding angle, socio-cultural reasons can be decisive in the downfall or success of women-focused mobility initiatives in India. A study by Anand and Tiwari (2006) and Singh (2017) confirms that of women drivers and entrepreneurs in the transport industry are often stigmatized, do not receive support from family and are under constant threat of insecurity. This social construct limits the woman's agency to partake in public spaces and dissuades sustained involvement for such campaigns.

Furthermore, women's decisions for their mobility are non-economic and relational as they depend on family perceptions, peer attitudes and community norms (Mahadevia, Joshi & Datey 2018). For instance, in semi-urban settings such as Bongaigaon, the concept of female auto-driving defied traditional gender hierarchies and was met with social resistance and decline in male ridership.

Weak follow up mechanisms and insufficient monitoring frameworks also institutionally undermine success. A 2019 NITI Aayog report on sustainable mobility noted that many pilot projects fail because they are never beyond a 'pilot' and there is no consolidated policy ownership and evidence-based assessment (NITI Aayog, 2019). With pink autos, however, after the initial media frenzy subsided, low levels of monetary support coupled with lack of maintenance and uncertain regulation resulted in vehicles not taking the road.

**2.4 Sustainability and Policy Gaps:**

Sustainable transport is most commonly understood through a lens of technology or the environment, but researchers have called for a "gendered sustainability framework" incorporating social and economic well-being (Uteng & Lucas, 2018). This vision requires focus on the long-term security of livelihood, safety nets and inclusiveness in decisions.

Kumar and Singh (2021) argue that Indian cities' gender-sensitive transport planning should have to move from "projects" to the "ecosystem." where women remain as active agent, rather than beneficiaries. The World Bank (2020) also explains in its report on mobility and gender that inclusive practices demand social engagement, mentorship-networks and financial means beyond the symbolic grants.

The Bongaigaon pink auto plan did not have this 360-degree thinking on sustainability. The initiative was highly donor dependent, did not include financial literacy programming for women drivers and failed to incorporate ongoing ridership promotion or safety audits. action it did not function so effectively.

**2.5 Synthesis of Literature:**

The general consensus in the writings is that the failure to have systems in place to support the lack of efforts on the part of women to design gender sensitive transport, leads to the inevitable failure of gender sensitive transport as an operational product in the rural area. Sustainability in this connection must be looked at as plane into which we must fit the development of transport on a three-plane approach:

- Economic sustainability - the continuance of economic income and livelihoods.
- Social sustainability – community approval, the changing of gender norms.
- Policy sustainability - The continuance of systems relevant to the institutionalisation.

The opportunity for monitoring and structures for accountability. It is against this backdrop, that the pink auto project in Bongaigaon is placed, not as a stand-alone failure, but within

the ambit of advanced political parental fatigue, that is where systems derived programmes are kicked off for their subjective value only and there is nothing included into the design for sustainability.

**Table 1:** Women-Centric Transport Initiatives in India: A comparative presentation across a decade [2014–2023]

| Initiative | Year | City/State | Implementing Agency | Key Features | Outcome/Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pink Auto, Bongaigaon | 2018 | Assam | DTO, National Urban Livelihood Mission. | Women-only e-rickshaw drivers | Discontinued by 2023 |
| Sakhi Cab Service | 2018 | Telangana | Women Welfare Dept. | Women cab drivers | Limited expansion |
| Tejaswini Scheme | 2017 | Maharashtra | State Transport Dept. | Women bus conductors/drivers | Ongoing |
| Safe City Transport | 2020 | Delhi | DTC & MoHUA | GPS-tracked women routes | Ongoing |

Note. This table reflects selected women-centred transport initiative across India.
Source: Table calculated from NITI Aayog (2019), MoHUA (2021), UN Women (2021).

## 3. Research Methodology:

### 3.1 Research Design:

The entire project is based on both primary and secondary data, and adopts a descriptive-exploratory design. The aim is to have a look at the structural, social and policy related barriers in respect of women-centred transport initiative which is the pink auto scheme in Bongaigaon. Assam. The qualitative approach was adopted in this study which was used in preference to the quant, as it allowed for a richer and fuller understanding of what the contextual as well as social circumstances lead to in respect of the institutional set-up, the variation of gender experience which cannot with ease be assessed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is framed by a constructivist perspective, which acknowledge that social reality is co-constructed through constructed discourses, policies discourse and community. Research in this vein dovetails with feminist research traditions which prioritize voices and social structures rather than mere numbers (Hesse-Biber 2014).

### 3.2 Data Sources:

The research is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data is collected directly from the respondents and the secondary data is collected from the:
(government reports (e.g., MoHUA, 2021; NITI Aayog, 2019)
Transport gender-inclusion project appraisals by NGOs
Academic journal articles focussing on sustainable mobility and gender (e.g., Anand & Tiwari, 2006; Kumar & Singh, 2021)

Media representation and field reports based on the Bongaigaon pink auto project (2020–2023)
Global reports like ITF (2019), UN Women (2021) and World Bank (2020)

The criteria used to select sources was credibility, relevance and recency - retaining insights diverging from policy to those at a socio-cultural level.

**3.3 Selection of the Case: Pink Autos, Bongaigaon**

Selection of the Bongaigaon pink auto project as a critical case The Bongaigaon pink auto project was selected for being a critical case because it is symbolic in the town-satellite setting as a woman-owned/operated transportation mode. Secondly, the presence of public documentation, press coverage and local study parties. The story has an all-too-predictable ending — which is why it is so useful as a case of policy failure.

By adopting a case-based approach that takes the project as context, made it possible for us to rebuild its lifecycle -from inception and media hype to operational constraints and decreased visibility.

**3.4 Data Analysis Method:**

Thematic analysis from documents, reports and media reports:
Symbolism versus sustainability
Structural Barriers
Policy Gaps
Gendered Perceptions
Operational Discontinuity

This thematic framework has surfaced repeated themes, consistent and inconsistent, and silences in the story of the initiative. Cross-validation occurred through triangulation across media data, policy sources and academic literature (Patton, 2015).

**3.5 Ethical Considerations:**

The direct ethical risks of this research are considered low given the study design as we use secondary data from public sources. The research complies with ethical standards of institutions and the APA 7th edition referencing is used in all parts of this study to guarantee academic honesty.

**4. Findings and Analysis:**

**4.1 Pink Auto Initiative and Its Awareness:**

The Pink Auto Scheme in Bongaigaon had been introduced in 2018 under the guidance of the District Transport Office (DTO) and the Nation Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM), and was touted as a leading gender empowerment model and women security for semi-urban mobility. It was an effort that offered colour-coded auto-rickshaws which were operated by women only and aimed at serving female passengers, as well as schoolchildren. Every driver was provided a partially subsidized e-rickshaw on micro-credit basis along with training in driving and customer behaviour (Assam State Transport Department, 2020).

There was significant fanfare about the program's opening. The media has presented it as a landmark in gender inclusion in the transport industry (The Assam Tribune, 2020). Woman beneficiaries described initial optimism and support of the community, seeing T6 as an opportunity for earning money and independence. Early surveys showed females had greater sense of safety among commuters (Das, 2020).

Nonetheless, this initial victory was to be but short-lived. In a year and a half, the streets were littered with pink autos lying idle and non-commercialising autos shalt not be sold between 6. Factory produced them seductively at the rate of one for each booking licence but drivers preferred to go where destiny took them. Only four of these were still operational as of mid-2022, indicating a wider breaking down of the effort.

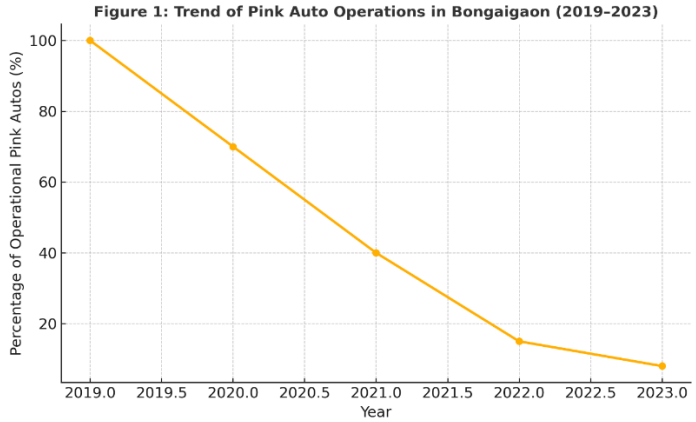


Figure 1: Trend of Pink Auto Operations in Bongaigaon (2019–2023)

**Source:** *Compiled from Assam Transport Department (2021) and The Assam Tribune (2020).*

**4.2 Financial Fragility and Gaps in Institutions:**

The first issue was the lack of financial sustainability. The plan was based too much on ad hoc public sector and NGO grants with no provision for an evolving grant or maintenance fund. Drivers contended with rising electricity and maintenance costs, sporadic ridership and pressure to repay microfinance companies. According to accounts to local reports, many women reported that their daily earning just about covered the operating costs (Das, 2021). With no kind of financial follow-up mechanism in place it was defaults that repossessed cars, putting other recruits off. In addition, there is lack of coordination between SULM and agencies such as transport cooperatives and local banks which led to administrative bottlenecks (Assam Urban Development Mission 2021).

This reflects Kumar and Singh's (2021) notion of "project-based inclusion" – schemes do not succeed in women's empowerment when they are financially symbolic rather than economically sustainable. There is no micro-enterprise support to those classes, no flexible way of repayment; so, such initiatives die down when there is excitement.

**4.3 Socio-Cultural Resistance and Sexism:**

The second significant was community stigma and discrimination, particularly towards women. Even though formally employed as drivers, women drivers had to endure scorn and harassment from their male counterparts in the public sphere that has historically been considered as masculine domain (Mahadevia et al., 2018). Local commuters, especially men, hesitated to take pink autos as they felt that it was "special service" and not common transport.

Family pressure was another deterrent. A number of contributors raised resistance from husbands or family members who objected to women driving trucks commercially (Singh, 2017). This environment also limited women's capacity to sustain independent operations.

This situation was compounded by lack of regular awareness campaigns. Symbolically, the project uplifted women, but it failed to disrupt patriarchal mindsets which underpin how women mobilize (Levy, 2013; Peters, 2013). As a result, empowerment was performative rather than transformative.

**4.4 Safety, Facility, and Operational Concerns:**

A third cause was the lack of supporting infrastructure. With a safety focus, there were no identified parking areas, e-rickshaw charging point and monitoring of set routes (NITI Aayog, 2019). Most of the drivers were not provided with a maintenance facility and some even used the vehicles for personal errands to make ends meet (Assam Livelihood Report, 2021).

The absence of rationalized route, fixed fare structures contributed for a very fierce competition against traditional male drivers. In different instances, associations of male drivers opposed the inclusion of pink autos arguing "unfair competition" (Das, 2020). The absence of support from the institutions that might mediate these disputes further discouraged entry.

This complements Uteng and Lucas (2018) who contend that the sustainability of gender sensitive mobility programs have to demonstrate "ecosystemic readiness" — where physical, institutional and social infrastructures must be capable of sustaining one another. The operational weakness of the pink auto project therefore lay in its disconnection from the other departments of urban transport.

**4.5 Policy and Monitoring Limitations:**

Absence of long term follow up was another major limitation. There were few data collected, little attempt to monitor progress or follow up by implementing agencies post-launch. The scheme is said to have no reverse loop—no formal provision of complaints, feedback from the riders or financial re-assessment in place (Assam Transport Department, 2021).

What passes for governance is a far broader problem with Indian social policy – an in-built discontinuity between policy design and governance (Pande & Mitra, 2020). Projects are often launched with donor zeal but are not institutionally rooted to respond to shifting local circumstances.

By the year 2023 the pink auto initiative was more a logo of autos just being there. …decals in decay, enthusiasm in decay. The intervention could not become cemented in the local transport culture, proving that without the support concerning resilience of institutional systems. policies even if symbolic can crumble to dust. (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

**Table 2: Identified Barriers in the Implementation of the Pink Auto Scheme (Bongaigaon, 2018–2023)**

| Barrier Type | Description | Implication |
|---|---|---|
| Financial | Lack of long-term subsidies and credit support | Economic non-viability |
| Social | Gender bias and limited acceptance among male commuters and communities | Cultural resistance and low ridership |
| Institutional | Absence of monitoring, evaluation, and performance tracking mechanisms | Policy discontinuity and lack of accountability |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Infrastructure | No dedicated charging stations or parking spaces for women drivers | Operational inefficiency and project stagnation |

Note. This table illustrates the multi-dimensional barriers in evidence in the implementation of the Pink Auto Scheme in Bongaigaon, Assam, during the years 2019 to 2023.
Source: Compiled from Assam Transport Department (2021), Das (2020), and Kumar & Singh (2021).

**4.6 Thematic Interpretation:**

The resulting findings offer an explanation nuanced, as it were, for the failure of health reform Israel:
Economic fragility compromised financial independence.
Cultural resistance limited social legitimacy.
Long term governance support began to erode amid institutional indifference.
Infrastructural neglect compromised operational continuities.

These mutually reinforcing inadequacies are the basis of the essential claim that sustainability needs to be a consideration in the first instance, not a conclusion of hindsight, in the gender inclusive Even, needs to be incorporated into the fabric of their economic, social and institutional existence at the outset (World Bank, 2020; UNOSWAP/MCOEIFD/ITP/UN/5051301748V7 000014 April 2021 UN Women, 2021).

The Pink Auto project then offers a cautionary note as to how even the most symbolically loaded schemes can crash to terra firm not because misconceived in their intentions but because their practical unreality bound them for decline in any case given the opportunism which was behind them.

**5. Discussion, Policy Recommendations, and Conclusion:**

**5.1 Discussion:**

The conclusion is that the Pink Auto Initiative in Bongaigaon was not a failure of vision, but of sustainability mainstreaming. The program had social relevance, and symbolic import; but its brief tenure raises again the question of why gender-oriented programs wither when policy, finance, and culture are not in sync.

This pattern reflects a wider one in India — projects that start as symbols of empowerment but peter out because of flimsy institutional scaffolding and lack of follow-up. Kumar and Singh (2021) explain this as "the policy fatigue of empowerment," whereby schemes focus on quick visibility, rather than long term impact.

Conceptually, this result can be interpreted using stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984) and social sustainability frameworks (Uteng & Lucas, 2018). Stakeholder theory focuses on the needs of all parties affected — drivers, riders, policymakers and financiers — rather than favoring a particular group. Out of such interdependencies there was fragmentation in Bongaigaon.

The business case for sustainability, as outlined in much of the sustainability literature also emphasize the "triple bottom line" — economic, social and institutional (Elkington 1997). The program of the separated pink goods stressed social inclusion while ignoring economic and institutional foundations. Relying on temporary subsidies left it vulnerable and the failure to build awareness undercut its cultural normalization.

Moreover, gendered resistance and symbolic policymaking are formidable structural obstacles. Programs directed at women in male-dominated fields need to consider more than representation; they must also address actual redistribution of resources, opportunities and social power (Peters 2013). In the absence of these shifts, programs become temporary exceptions, not long-term change.

In the end, this dialogue demonstrates that female-friendly mobility projects will prove to be unsustainable if they are not in fact operating as ecosystems — pooling together funding, training, safety infrastructure and community engagement. Sam Gerry is a philosophy lecturer at Ashoka University and a member, Young India Foundation Human as Symbolism can only do so much to overturn patriarchy; sustainability should be conceived of its operational backbone.

**5.2 Policy Recommendations:**

These are prescribed, based on thematic understanding and literature review, for building sustainable gender-inclusive transport systems in semi-urban India:

**Integrate Financial Sustainability:**

Create revolving credit pools and insurance-based micro finance programmes for women who are drivers to provide constant income with lesser payback burden. Gradual financial autonomy mechanisms should replace the decade support (NITI Aayog, 2019).

**Institutionalize Multi-Stakeholder Governance:**

Coordination between local government agencies, women self-help groups and financial organizations is necessary. Tripartite collaborations need to oversee processes, mediate disputes and provide on-going mentorship (World Bank, 2020).

**Capacity Building and Continuous Training:**

The programs should go beyond driving lessons, offering entrepreneurship, vehicle maintenance and digital literacy education. This contributes to women operators' self-reliance and business knowledge (UN Women, 2021).

**Community Sensitization and Awareness Campaigns:**

In order to counter such social resistance, efforts should be taken by the media and through civic outreach programs to normalize women's presence in public transport. Public statements from men in power, faith leaders and local institutions can serve as a catalyst for changes in attitudes (Mahadevia et al., 2018).

**Infrastructure and Safety Ecosystem:**

There should be separate charging points, parking area and safety kiosks for women driven autos, the governments should make such arrangements. Efficiency as well as passenger safety can be enhanced through route planning and real-time GPS monitoring (MoHUA, 2021).

**Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks:**

Sustainability requires ongoing measurement. The introduction of Gender Mobility scorecards – blending ridership, income security and social acceptance metrics – can help to institutionalize accountability (ITF 2019).

**5.3 Conclusion:**

The Pink Auto pilot in Bongaigaon is a microcosm of the promise and perils of gender-focused mobility initiatives in India. It started out as something empowering and ended up being a quiet reminder of policy shortsightedness. The failure of the program indicates that empowering people without ensuring sustainability is merely a talk.

If the women-focused programmes are to work, financial robustness, infrastructure preparedness and cultural re-skilling must be embedded in their design. Sustainable mobility projects have a future not in novelty but in nurture — bringing women's empowerment to actions that lead to structural change.

More generally, the study highlights a key observation:

Sustainable development must no longer be an appendix to gender inclusion; it has to become a prior condition.

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