

MUGHAL CALLIGRAPHY

P.I.S. MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

Of the three major branches of Fine Arts, architecture, painting and calligraphy, the last one usually occupies the first place in the Muslim world. If the authority of Abū al-Faḍl, the court historian of the Mughal emperor Akbar the great, is accepted, both calligraphy and painting received tremendous impetus and patronage from this emperor, yet the former "was more important of the two arts."¹

Because of the general inhibition, if not the ban on image making, the art of sculpture did not flourish in the Muslim world. Although painting was there but it also stood somewhat condemned. The Muslims had only one great painter, Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād who is sometimes called Raphael of the East, but they did not have Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo or even a Titian. Leonardo and Michelangelo of the Muslim world were the great calligraphers like Mīr 'Alī, Mīr 'Imād, Muhammad Ḥusayn Kāshmirī and 'Abd al-Rashīd Daylamī.

The great importance and the universal acclaim of the art of calligraphy in the Muslim world may be due to a number of considerations.

The philosophy and principles of all Islamic arts are deeply embedded in the basic tenets of the religion; the most fundamental of which is the idea of one God. In Islam the notion of the uncompromisingly abstract nature of God gives rise to a kind of thirst for abstract beauty. This is manifested even in a concrete and ponderous art-form like architecture. The Taj Mahal, though bound by spatial dimensions, becomes abstract, in the ultimate analysis, due to its beauty, elegance and excellence or whatever it might be. It transcends time and space and that is why poets are prone to describe it as a "dream in marble."

The same abstract principle applies to the art of painting as well. For instance the best of Persian miniature paintings intending to depict a scene or event do not refer to any three dimensional reality. Rather these wonderful arts succeed in creating an imaginary world; enchanting but equivocal – a world of fantasy and make-believe.

But above all arts, calligraphy by means of its abstract elements such as the verticals, horizontals, angles, ovals, circles, curves, loops, twists and turns commends itself to quench the thirst emanating from the search for God. This abstract aesthetic consideration leads to concrete action – the practice of writing which is deemed to be an act of piety, because in the course of acting as penman, acumen may be acquired to copy the Qur'ān, the word of God, most elegantly. This act of piety gains additional dimension when it is compared with the practice of the art of painting, which flourished in spite of the theological controversy and general condemnation. Even the painters themselves while depicting the figures of living beings could not be sure that they were not incurring the wrath of God. Hence they humbly used to add the word, sinner, before their names while putting in the signature on their works of art.

Hemmed in the orthodox theological condemnation and public disapproval the art of painting could only be practised in isolation and under the royal patronage. The other major art, architecture had obviously been more expensive than painting. So unlike the practice of calligraphy in which the rich and poor alike could participate, the art of architecture thrived only under the direct patronage of kings and nobles. People might gaze at the architectural monuments with amazement; even admire their excellences but could never claim them as their own. Sometimes a magnificent monument stands as eloquent testimony to the ruthless exploitation of human labour and glorification of the royal tyranny.

When sculpture and painting had to be mostly avoided as a means of architectural ornamentations, calligraphy was very often an integral component of Islamic architecture. But calligraphy had almost been inseparable from Muslim painting, specially when it was done as miniatures to illustrate books. Had not the calligraphy in the so illustrated books been pleasing, the miniatures would appear there as odd and incongruous. Moreover, calligraphy exerted considerable influence on painting in technical matters. The experience gained through practising the art of writing may help in drawing, an essential pre-requisite of painting.

Then, although the art of calligraphy remained unique in the Muslim world, it was intricately linked with architecture and painting. Although it was not so essential as in the case of architecture and painting, still the royal patronage helped the most in developing the art of calligraphy in Mughal India.

The consideration of piety and an inner aesthetic urge might have induced the Muslim kings and nobles to encourage and even practise personally the art of calligraphy. The parallel is only found in China where calligraphy was held in high esteem and the emperors used to indulge occasionally in composing poetry and practising calligraphy.

Zahīr al-Dīn Bābur, the founder of Mughal empire in India was scion of the ancestors who were adept in the use of swords. It is indeed a wonder that coming from such a stock he would exhibit almost equal skill in handling both the sword and pen. Bābur's descendents down to the unfortunate Bahādur Shāh inherited his qualities of head and heart, but none of them could surpass him in using the sword and pen with such even dexterity. But in the practice of the art of calligraphy he had been followed by almost all his descendents except Akbar whose unique genius could spare him the pains of reading and writing in acquiring knowledge.

Bābur, the successful warrior and founder of an empire, used to compose verses in Persian as well as in his mother tongue (Turkish) and wrote his autobiography of unsurpassing literary value. The observations that he makes on the arts of painting and music in his autobiography bear witness to his capability for artistic appreciation.² But he excelled in the practice of calligraphy and is said to have made a copy of the Qur'ān in a style called *Khatt-i-Bāburī* for presentation to Makkah.³ There has been controversy as to the exact nature of this *Khatt-i-Bāburī*, but the recent findings of a Soviet scholar, Dr. S. Azimjanova have conclusively shown that it was a kind of new alphabets evolved by Bābur on the basis of the Arabic alphabet, somewhat changed in form.⁴

But credit must go to his son and successor, Humāyūn for laying down the foundation of what, in a modern sense, may be called the Mughal School of calligraphy. Of course it ought to be stated at the very outset that it is not easy to define and demarcate this Mughal School of calligraphy. In the Mughal architecture and painting, the Indian and Persian elements are distinguishable and their juxtaposition and fusion are traceable. But it is extremely difficult to lay hands on the subtle and imperceptible differences between Persian and Indian calligraphy, especially in the case of *nasta'liq* style. It was during his exile in Persia, at the court of Shāh Tahmāsp, that Humāyūn had the good luck to be acquainted with the development of Persian calligraphy and painting. At the time of his return to India he was accompanied by a number of noted calligraphers from Persia - of the six calligraphers whose names are recorded⁵ Khwājah Muḥammad Murīm who was a master of *Naskh* and *Thulth* and had been attached to the court of Shāh Tahmāsp, appears most important.

The untimely death of emperor Humāyūn shortly after his reconquest of India did not allow him to witness the flowering of his artistic enterprises. But his illustrious son, Akbar, fully utilized the facilities bequeathed by the father and raised the art of calligraphy along with architecture and painting to a new height of excellence.

A galaxy of master calligraphers, attached to the court of Akbar, exploited the potentialities of the Arabic scripts to the full, giving rise to a varieties of styles and exquisite patterns.

Specimens of calligraphy of most of the Mughal calligraphers on specially manufactured and prepared paper are now scattered and preserved in the libraries and museums all over the world. Yet stone and stucco appear to provide them with better materials to work on. In addition to durability the facades and walls of mosques, mausoleums and palaces offered them more scope to display their talent and skill in shaping, enlarging and modulating the letters in any way they liked. The high aesthetic qualities of the calligraphy may be fully illustrated with reference to the Mughal monuments alone. Calligraphy in all the principal styles, *Naskh*, *Thulth*, *Ṭughrā* and *nasta'liq*, had been skillfully employed for epigraphic and decorative purposes.

The inscriptions written in gold on the carefully prepared blue surfaces of the walls of the mausoleum of Salīm Chishtī at Fatehpur Sikri display superb *Ṭughrā* of Akbar's time. This *Ṭughrā* style may be favourably compared with the best specimens of Ḥusain Shāhī calligraphy of Bengal. The inscriptions on both the exterior and interior sides of the main gateway of the same monument are executed in elegant *Thulth*.

More illustrations of such skillful employment of *Naskh* and *Thulth* styles of the period are found on the walls of the Great Mosque of Fatehpur Sikri. Muḥammad Ma'sūm, the famous calligrapher who originally came from Qandahar, designed the calligraphy of these inscriptions.

The tradition of using *nasta'liq* for epigraphic purposes existed in India before the advent of the Mughals, but the credit for perfecting this style in India goes to the Mughals. In this respect the contributions of the Persian calligraphers who were continually flocking to the Mughal court had been most invaluable.

The first effective and extensive use of *Nasta'liq* for epigraphic writing is again found on the monuments of Fatehpur Sikri. In the great mosque of Fatehpur Sikri, beneath the propylon entrance to its principal chamber there are two panels of inscriptions written in simple but exquisite *nasta'liq*. The calligraphy here has been cut in relief along with other decorative elements such as plants and flowers. A close look reveals that all the decorative

disigns and motifs of the panels are completely surpassed by the sublime elegance of the calligraphy.

The minor defects and lapses in shaping, moulding and designing the individual letters may be overlooked in a complex pattern of *ṭughṛā*. But *nasta'liq*, as may be observed in the above noted instance, each letter has to stand alone on its own merits and then its is to be related to other letters in proportion and harmony. In fact, the entire success of *nasta'liq* style depends on the perfect execution of each individual letter and its proper relation with others. In the present instance the moulding and modulation with infinite care have succeeded in producing a kind of inexpressible sublime simplicity and weightlessness that make the beauty of the calligraphy celestial.

Heaviness which may be the quality of architecture is inherent in *ṭughṛā* style. But a delicate style like *nasta'liq* could only match the monuments built of sandstones and marbles.

One more example of Mughal mural calligraphy displaying such elusive and celestial elements may be observed in the inscriptions written in gold on the painted walls of *Khawābgāh*, *Maḥal-i-Khāṣ* at Fatehpur Sikri. *Khawābgāh* means dream chamber. It might have been the emperor's vision that the calligraphy of the dream chamber should possess the dream-like qualities. A calligrapher was there to make an attempt to express that vision through his art. The attempt succeeded in bringing forth a kind of *nasta'liq* with elusive elements that might put the emperor's tense eyes to dreamy sleep.

As has been stated by Sir Herbert Read, "The history of art is dominated by the works of a few geniuses, and the minor manifestation of a period are particles on the lines of force that emanate from these fixed points."⁶ The entire scene of Mughal calligraphy had been dominated by a few master calligraphers. They were Muḥammad Husain Kashmīrī, titled *Zarrīn Qalam*, 'Abd al-Raḥīm, 'Anbarīn Qalam, 'Abd al-Rashīd Daylamī and Mīr Panja Kash. There had been many minor but very good calligraphers who followed one master or another, but all the trends of significant development emanated from the great masters. In this essay an attempt has been made to indicate the main courses of the development of Mughal calligraphy concentrating the discussion on the great masters.

Abū al-Faḍl says, "His Majesty [Akbar] shows much regards for the art and takes a great interest in different styles of writing, hence the great number of calligraphers. *Nasta'liq* has especially received a new impetus."⁷ As has already been noted down, the history of Mughal calligraphy began with Bābur, but Humāyūn actually laid the foundation of an edifice on which the superstructure was built by Akbar. The munificence of his court

attracted more calligraphers from Persia. Indians with artistic talent also joined his service.

Before the advent of the Mughals, two major styles, *Nashk* and *Thulth* developed so fully in India that the Mughal calligraphers could hardly improve upon them. But *nasta'liq*, as Abū al-Faḍl says, received "a new impetus" from the emperor Akbar.

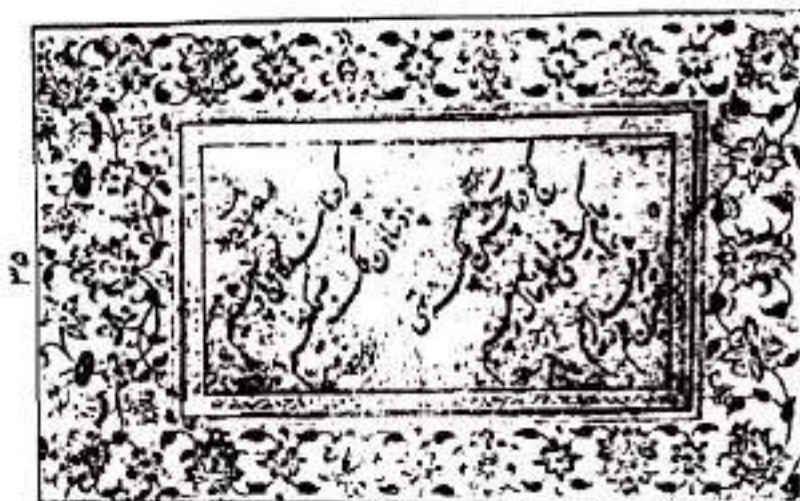
The *nasta'liq* style looks simple and its elusive nature has misled many to regard it as an easy style. But in actual practice *nasta'liq* appears to be most difficult. One needs maximum of patience and perseverance, and a long period of hard training to be adept in this style.

Apart from the Persian masters, two major calligraphers Muḥammad Ḥusain from Kashmir and Mīr Khālīl Allāh from Golconda came to adorn the court of Akbar. In the words of Abū al-Faḍl "The artist who in the shadow of the throne of His Majesty, has become a master of calligraphy is Muḥammad Ḥusain of Kashmir. He has been honoured with the title *ṣarrīf Qalam*, the golden pen. He surpassed his master, Maulānā 'Abd al-'Azīz; his *maddāt* and *dawā'ir* show everywhere a proper proportion to each other and the art critics consider him equal to Mulla Mīr 'Alī."¹⁰

Muḥammad Ḥusain had a long career covering the entire reign of Akbar and extending to that of Jahāngīr. During his long active career he went on creating bewildering varieties of *nasta'liq* calligraphy. He could write so effectively and freely in so many ways in the same style that many may mistake the specimens from the same hand as from different hands. He was a restless genius who could never remain satisfied in perfecting just one way of writing. As the perfection of his art was unassailable, so also his experimentations appeared endless. Towards the final phase of his active career: he succeeded in creating such specimens of calligraphy as would seem to defy the fatigue of old age and proclaim the eternal youthfulness of artistic creation. Specimens of his calligraphy are now available in the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, and Oriental Public Library, Bankipore, India.¹¹

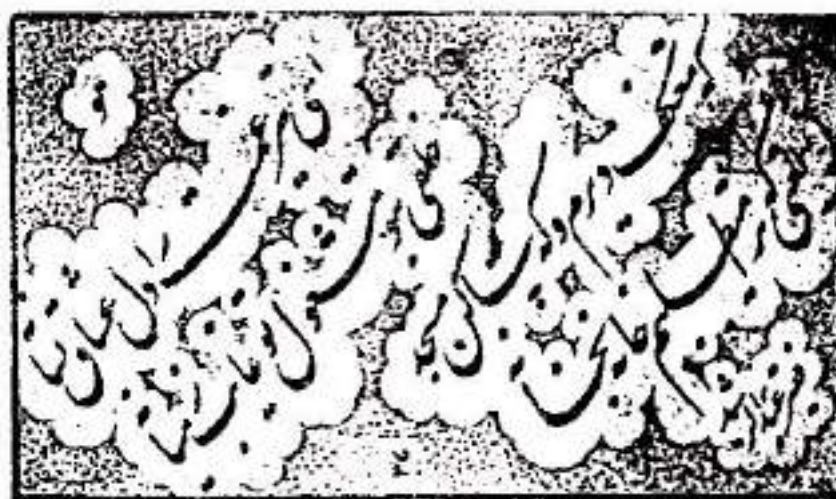
Another major calligrapher at the court of Akbar was Mīr Khālīl Allāh who originally came from Iraq and attached himself to the court of Sultān Ibrāhīm 'Adīl Shāh of Golconda. He was much admired for being adept in *nasta'liq* style - and honoured with the title *Bādshāh Qalam*.¹²

Far more talented and accomplished than Mīr Khālīl Allāh has been 'Abd al-Raḥīm. Early in his life he came from Khurasan to join the service of 'Abd al-Raḥīm Khān Khānān, son of Bayram Khān. While in the service of the Khān Khānān he acquired much proficiency in *nasta'liq* and eventually he was presented to the emperor.



CALLIGRAPHY BY 'ABD AL-RAHĪM 'ANBARĪN QALAM

Source: *Ṣaḥīfah-i-Khushnawīsān*, Fig. 35



CALLIGRAPHY BY 'ABD AL-RASHĪD DAYLAMĪ AQA RASHĪD

Source: *Ṣaḥīfah-i-Khushnawīsān*, Fig. 37



CALLIGRAPHY BY AMĪR RIDWĪ PANJAH KASH

Source: *Ṣaḥīfah-i-Khushnawīsān*, Fig. 54

CALLIGRAPHY BY MĪR 'IMĀD

Source: Shāghil 'Uthmānī,
Ṣaḥīfah-i-Khushnawīsān.
 (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqqi-
 i-Urdu Hind, 1963), Fig. 40



CALLIGRAPHY BY MUHAMMAD HUSAYN KASHMIRI ZARRĪN QALAM

Source: *Ṣaḥīfah-i-Khushnawīsān*, Fig. 44

In the opinion of his contemporary art critics no one excelled him in the art of writing except Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kashmīrī. In recognition of his achievements as calligrapher he received two titles, *Raushan Qalam* and '*Anbarīn Qalam*'.¹³

There are two manuscripts in the British Museum, London, displaying the *nasta'liq* style of 'Abd al Raḥīm at its height.¹⁴ The intricate yet gracefully flowing lines, *maddāt* and *dawā'ir* and alignment of different letters – all are done with so much extraordinary skill that entire calligraphy appears amazingly perfect. 'Abd al-Raḥīm's calligraphy does not seem to possess either the hypnotic effect of Muḥammad Ḥusain's art or the magic charm of the Great Mīr 'Imād. One may notice in his calligraphy a peculiar kind of lyricism that reminds one of the art of famous Sultān 'Alī Mashhedī.

Besides the great masters at least twenty-six minor calligraphers had been active during the reign of Akbar.¹⁵ The enthusiasm for this art at this period appears so high that even the busy nobles and courtiers like Khān Khānān and Todar Mal received training in it¹⁶ and practised it in spare time. Some Hindu artists like Roy Manohar mastered this art and practised it professionally.

The reign of emperor Jahāngīr appears to be a sort of interim period in the development of the art of calligraphy. No new master calligrapher emerges now. He enjoyed the ripe fruits of all the developments that took place in his father's time. Nevertheless, Jahāngīr himself had a good hand in its practice and he managed to offer all his sons a proper training in this art. Shāh-zādā Khusro, Sultān Parwiz, and Shāh-zādā Khurram who was to become the emperor later – all of them acquired proficiency in *nasta'liq*.¹⁷

With Shāhjahān's reign begins the second glorious phase of the development of calligraphy in India. *Risālah dar Dhikr Khush-nawīzān*, a manuscript copy of which is now in the British Museum,¹⁸ records the names of twenty-two calligraphers of this period.

The greatest calligrapher of the period was 'Abd al-Rashīd Daylamī, popularly known as Āqā Rashīd. After Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kashmīrī and 'Abd al-Raḥīm, '*Anbarīn Qalam*', Āqā Rashīd had been most famous and influential calligrapher who lived in India.

He was a nephew and pupil of Mīr 'Imād after whose murder he migrated to India. Emperor Shāhjahān who had a great admiration for Mīr 'Imād, welcomed his nephew with open arms. The emperor had been pleased to shower on him innumerable bounties which he deserved so well. Having had a secure position and immense fortune, Āqā Rashīd could peacefully pursue his artistic profession to a very old age.

Āqā Rashīd is said to have had the pen of proverbial Mānī. He has been also called the prophet of calligraphy.¹² As Muḥammad Husain Kashmīrī and ‘Abd al-Rahīm, ‘*Anbarūn Qalam*, had dominated the scene of the development of calligraphy for two generations till the end of Jahāngīr's reign, Āqā Rashīd guided the course of its development during Shāhjahān's reign and all the subsequent periods. No major calligrapher either in India or Persia exerted so much influence not only on his contemporary artists but also on the generations of artists who came after him. Almost a century after his death, Muḥammad Amīr Ridwī, commonly known as Panja Kash, the last major calligrapher of Mughal India, followed his style. He is the only calligrapher whose death anniversary in the later Mughal period had been regularly observed in the month of Muḥarram. On this occasion calligraphers of all important towns used to gather at Akbarabad and derive benefit from exchanging views on this art and other professional matters. Two prominent members of the Mughal Royal family, Prince Dārā Shikoh, the eldest son of the emperor Shāhjahān, and princess Zayb al-nisā, the talented daughter of Aurangzeb, learnt the art of calligraphy from Āqā Rashīd. The majority of the court calligraphers had been his direct pupils. Even Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī titled *Jawāhir Raqam* who himself was a major artist and teacher of Aurangzeb in calligraphy admired and followed his style.

Specimens of Āqā Rashīd's wonderful calligraphy are now preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, British Museum, London, Public Library, Leningrad, Oriental Public Library, Bankipore, Rampur State Library and the Archaeological Museum, Delhi.

To begin with, Āqā Rashīd must have followed the instructions and style of his illustrious uncle, Mīr ‘Imād. It was indeed his good luck to receive lessons in calligraphy from such a great master. He could have remained satisfied with imitating the inimitable style of Mīr ‘Imād. But Āqā Rashīd's genius enabled him to come out of the spell of his uncle and develop his own distinct individual style.

His calligraphy retains certain tendencies of the wavy movements of circles, curves and lines of Mīr ‘Imād's style. But this is not the chief characteristics of his calligraphy. In his mature style, if the *Dawā’ir* of such letters as *qāf*, *nūn* etc. are attentively looked at, they reveal very subtle but charming variations in their roundness at different points. It requires an astonishing skill in moving the *qalam* to achieve this effect. In the construction of *maddāt* he also appears to have attained an unprecedented peak of perfection.

Although substantially influenced by the unrivalled style of Āqā Rashīd, at least three calligraphers of Shahjahān's reign, Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī, Muḥammad Salīm and Muḥammad Murād, have left their individual marks on the development of this art of the period.

In the practice of the art of calligraphy, Aurangzeb received lessons in *nasta'liq* style from Mīr Sayyid 'Alī. Later on he had training also in *naskh* style from Muḥammad 'Arif.²⁴

This puritan monarch does not appear to have pursued any art for art's sake. He mastered the art of calligraphy to be able to copy the Qur'ān as elegantly as possible as an act of piety. He is indeed said to have written two copies of the Qur'ān with his own hand to send to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. A manuscript of the Qur'ān in his minute but elegant handwriting is preserved in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta.

Most of the calligraphers of Shahjahān's time continued to work during the reign of Aurangzeb. *Risālah dar Dhikr Khushnawīsān* mentions five new names of calligraphers of this period. One of them, Hidāyat Allāh who earned the title *Zarrin Raqam* seems to be most important at the royal court. He had the post of the superintendent of the Royal Library. He acted as instructor of the Prince Kām Baksh, the youngest son of the emperor Aurangzeb and several other princes.

He began his career as calligrapher by imitating the style of Muḥammad Husain Kashmīrī. Later he perfected his style under the able guidance of Mīr Sayyid 'Alī, *Jawāhūr Raqam*. His style shows traces of the influence of Aqā Rashīd as well. But he had the talent to absorb and assimilate all the trends and influences emanating from the different centres and masters, and then develop his own individual style. The development of the art of calligraphy reached its peak in the reign of Akbar and its high standard remained intact till the end of the reign of Aurangzeb.

After the reign of Aurangzeb, in the days of the decline of the Mughal empire, calligraphy as an art continued to flourish. The author of *Risālah dar Dhikr Khushnawīsān*, has recorded the names of all important calligraphers of the later Mughal period. Although there were a number of good calligraphers and at least two major ones, no calligrapher of the stature of Muḥammad Husain Kashmīrī or Aqā Rashīd appeared in this period. The purity and standard of the art had been maintained through a chain of calligraphers, yet the lack of real talent manifested itself in the rise of a host of pseudo-styles.

The weak rulers of the later Mughal period were too preoccupied with maintaining their authority to be able to patronize the artistic activities. But despite the lack of royal patronage calligraphers like Amīr Ridwī, generally known as Panja Kash and his pupil Aga Mirzā who were active during the reign of Akbar II and afterwards, continued to practise the art of calligraphy with so much enthusiasm and persistence that they deserve a high place among the later Indian calligraphers.

Mīr Panja Kesh began his career by imitating the style of Āqā Rashīd. Then he perfected his own style. The available specimens of his calligraphy in the British Museum and Delhi Archaeological Museum show that not only was he able to maintain the pristine purity of this art amid its general decline, he also made some original contribution to its development.

Bahādur Shāh, the last Mughal emperor, in spite of his sad and tragic life, was a good poet and calligrapher. He designed the calligraphy of the inscriptions of the Zīnat Maḥal at Farash Khāna and the Bath of Ḥakīm Aḥsan Allāh in Delhi.²¹ Bahādur Shah appeared like the last flicker of a long burning flame before its total extinction.

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