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Threads of empowerment

In February, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Vidyalaya Skill Development Centre will start a course in communicative English for women, adding to the three other programmes it already offers

BY A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

In her 30s, life took a turn for Radha (name changed). It was the pandemic and she lost her husband. The income she managed running a canteen at a school was not steady; and it would not meet the needs of her two children. That is when she got introduced to a beautician course run by Sri Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Vidyalaya Skill Development Centre. Ramya today is content working in a neighbourhood beauty parlour where she dabbles in different roles and responsibilities and has a steady income. The Centre is next working to get her a certificate from the Skill Development Council and that will empower her to start her own enterprise.

Two years since this skill development centre was started to mark the 125th anniversary of Ramakrishna Mission, many young women and homemakers have been trained in tailoring, aari work and beautician courses.

"We started by conducting a meeting with parents of our schools and had 20 people showing interest in the three-month tailoring programme," says Rama Kashyap, who is in-charge of the skill development centre. The Ramakrishna Mission runs five schools in and around T. Nagar.

A majority of the participants are mothers of children studying in the school although it is open to any deserving woman who wants to be financially independent by learning a new skill.

"One of our student's mother was a skilled tailor and she became the



At the skill development centre.

teacher along with another trainer," says Rama.

The centre got kickstarted thanks to the generosity of the alumni association.

A REUNION

- Old students of Sri RKM Sarada Vidyalaya Girls Higher Secondary School are meeting at the school campus on Usman Road for its annual reunion.
- The 1975 batch will be celebrating its golden jubilee reunion.
- All old students are welcome to attend the meet which starts at 10.30 a.m.

"The first 10 tailoring machines were contributed by the alumni which was a big impetus for the programme to take off," says Rama.

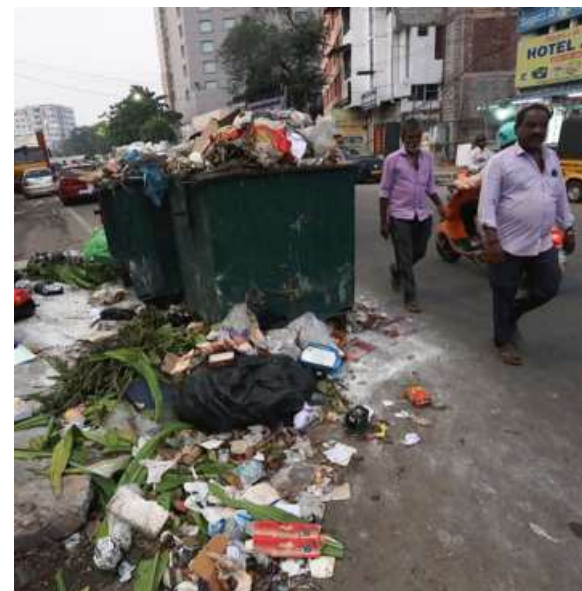
Whenever any new programme begins at the Centre, a message is sent out to the alumni group so that they can support it and also spread the word about it.

Rama says that the skill development centre will be taking up a full scale impact study this year and seek feedback on what course correction needs to be made.

"In February, we will be starting communicative English classes for women," she says.

The skill development centre is at 104 GN Chetty Road, T. Nagar. For details about the next batch, call 9940027108

Filled to the brim and beyond



Garbage clearance reportedly being patchy, three bins on Annai EVR Maniammai Salai (earlier Whannels Road) in Egmore is often filled to the brim and beyond, letting out a stench, sharply when the wind is astir. These bins are placed diametrically opposite the office of Director General of Prisons and Correctional Services. The image was taken on January 22, 2025. PHOTOS: PRINCE FREDERICK

Holy Angels alumni association celebrates silver jubilee

As in previous years, the reunion meet of old students of Holy Angels Anglo Indian Higher Secondary School in T. Nagar will be held on January 26 from 3 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. But this year's meet is extra special because the Holy Angels' Anglo Indian Higher Secondary School Alumni Association steps into its silver jubilee year.

Formed in December 1999 by late Sarojini Shanmugasundaran, Kamala Devi Par-

thasarathy of 1969 batch, and J. Revathi and Lakshmi Venkatraman of 1967 batch, they together drafted the blue print for the alumni association. The association was formally launched in December 1999 in the presence of Sr. Kamala, then principal and many retired teachers. The first meeting was held in January 2000, with Justice Ranganathan as chief guest.

What started with 150 alumni members has now a strength of more than 2,500, says

a note shared by the Alumni Association.

Many distinguished people are part of the association including Indra Nooyi, Chandrika Tandon and Prithika Chary. In the field of arts, the list includes Revathi Menon, Latha, Ramya Krishnan, Aishwarya Rajesh, Brindha Sivakumar and Poornima Rao. Bureaucrats include Janaki Arun Kumar and Sheela Balakrishnan.

All alumni are welcome for the reunion meet.

Reunion today

- The reunion meet of Thiru-Vi-Ka Higher Secondary School (Chennai) Alumni begins at 9.30 a.m. on January 26 followed by networking and lunch. K. Jagannathan, an alumnus of 1972-73 batch and former engineering director and chief engineer, Metro Water, is the chief guest.
- Old students from the 1975 batch, who are celebrating their golden jubilee reunion, will be in the spotlight at the meet at Lady Sivaswami Ayyar Girls' School in Mylapore.

A kit for green businesses to stay evergreen

Small sustainable businesses might espouse a lofty philosophy, but that does not insulate them against the rough edges of the market, one largely driven by hyper consumerism and a throwaway culture. Here is a survival kit based on the experiences of a few green businesses in Chennai

SHARON JESSICA MICHAEL

Sustainable businesses, no matter how small, are conscripted into climate action by default. Their contribution – through sustainable production processes and products that serve as eco-friendly alternatives – does chip away at the climate problem. While engaged in this larger battle, they are waging another at a personal level, a fight for survival. They need to stay afloat in a world that is largely at loggerheads with their ethos. As they slow down the process of production to be conscious in their choices of material, value craftsmanship and traditional artisans setting them high above the assembly line, and keep on eye on the waste being generated in the production process to make sure it is ploughed back into use and avoids the landfill, the larger world with its values of hyper consumption and fast fashion seem to pass them by. So, if you are a business that is small and green, how can you surmount the odds that are stacked up against you? How do you hold on to your green principles and still sustain your sustainable business? Here are pointers on how to do this, based on the experiences of a few small sustainable businesses in Chennai. Here are four principles that can shore up a small sustainable business.--

AI GENERATED
IMAGE:
M ARIVARASU

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Obviously, what applies in the larger business world, applies in the world of small green businesses too. Probably more so here.

Thendral Manimozhi, founder of Kamarkattu Ecostore, a Velachery-based micro enterprise that makes sustainable alternative skincare and homeware products, ensures she walks the brand's customers through its workaday realities through Insta reels, quickly crafted and free of frills. In this manner, the brand introduces its customers – even potential customers – to the invisible value that goes into the products through a stringently followed sustainability-driven production process. Over time, in her journey running Boutique Bougainvillea, Sherin realised that working value into her textiles would not suffice; she needed to speak value into them as well. She believes the road to sustaining a brand is paved with education and engagement. She extends an invitation to the boutique's customers to be participants in her brand's story. Sherin's boutique doubles as a "classroom", where customers are introduced to the intricacies of the weaving techniques in use and how the weft of sustainability is drawn through the process.

The customers also get to learn about the artisans behind each piece. "When people step into Boutique Bougainvillea, they step into a story. And once they know that story, it changes the way they see value," says Sherin, adding that her loyal client base is not drawn by the lowest price but by the highest intention. "The people who come to us are looking for something more. They want to feel good about their choices. It is about making a connection – once that bond is formed, it is hard to break."

LARGER COMMUNITY

A cause inevitably creates a community; birds of the same feather flocking together and swearing allegiance to the cause. Where sustainability is the cause, micro businesses espousing it should foster the community built around it. Small green businesses need to rally round one another. Through Boutique Bougainvillea, Sherin drives an initiative called The Handmade Story. It is a special event she holds every year to support smaller women-run sustainable businesses. "We offer our space for free," Sherin explains, "and we all pitch in for the marketing, so everyone benefits." The idea is simple: small businesses can come together, show off their work, and help one another grow. It is a perfect example of community support in action, all the while keeping sustainability at the core. Sherin also organises something called Kids Craft Carnival. "It is a fun event where we pick a few kids interested in crafts, mentor them for a month, and then help them showcase their products at an exhibition," she says. For Sherin, the objective is two-fold. It nurtures creativity in the next generation, and also swells the ranks of the green community.

RESIDENTS' CONNECT

Increasingly, residents' groups are pushing themselves to the front lines of the circular economy. Sustainable businesses can tap into the reach enjoyed by such associations. Ar. Sherin Joseph of Velachery-based Boutique Bougainvillea (which promotes slow fashion, valuing artisanal wisdom and selling handcrafted clothing) keeps a perennially active communication line with groups such as ROKA. Now, in Chennai, Residents of Kastubanagar Association (ROKA) is an exemplar of an association that has transcended the intrinsic hyperlocality of its green initiatives to create impact far and wide.. ROKA's dry waste drives (its latest scheduled for February 1-2) are usually pan-Chennai events. ROKA has become an inalienable part of Chennai's sustainability scene, being a compelling voice, one commanding attention from many other residents' associations in the metro, GCC and enterprises engaged in the circular economy. Through ROKA, Sherin's green circle got wider, particularly when she was introduced by the Adyar-based residents association to On Axis Green Consulting Pvt. Ltd., which has proved fruitful in terms of learning. In addition, Sherin is engaged in influencing residents in her own neighbourhood, Seva Nagar in Velachery to make eco-friendly choices. Sherin has taken steps to reduce waste in her local community, and as part of that, as recently as January 12, 2025, Boutique Bougainvillea hosted a composting workshop exclusively for Seva Nagar Welfare Association. "We are a small neighbourhood – about 80 households – and we are working on going zero waste," she says. Sherin launched an e-publication to raise awareness on waste management, helping her community live more sustainably.



This section is about efforts, small and big, that are being taken as part of climate action

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

Get the business model right for your small sustainable business – the model that suits your business the best. Mamta Jain of Samposhan (@thesamposhan) seems to be on a mission to promote Sustainable Development Goal 12 (sustainable and efficient use of natural resources and reducing waste). SDG12 pops along to define her, be it her Instagram page or LinkedIn profile. SDG5 too – which is about upholding gender equality and empowering women and girls. Her Adambakkam-based small business Samposhan prides itself on "saving 1615 plus kg of fabric scraps from Chennai's landfills and converting them into products of everyday use and decor." Here is a valuable insight from Mamta.

Sustainable small businesses often ignore a vital step, stakeholder mapping. In Mamta's words, "I first had a direct-to-consumer (B2C) approach in mind for my brand. The idea was to sell upcycled products directly to individual customers. However, after some time, I realised this model would take longer to yield results than anticipated. While there is a growing awareness of sustainability, convincing consumers to choose upcycled products over traditional ones was a slow process. The demand for these products simply was not as strong as I had hoped. This realisation prompted me to pivot my strategy from B2C to a business-to-business (B2B) and a business-to-government (B2G) model. By targeting corporations, businesses and government bodies, I could reach larger audiences and make a greater impact on sustainability. I saw an opportunity to work with businesses that could incorporate sustainable practices into their operations, as well as government bodies that could help implement policies supporting sustainability. Through these partnerships, I hoped to bring my products to a broader market while encouraging larger-scale environmental practices. The switch from B2C to B2B/B2G allowed me to scale the impact of my products and build relationships that could foster more substantial changes in the industry. This strategy was not only about expanding my customer base, but also about contributing to the larger goal of making sustainability a priority in businesses and government sectors."



A brand story

Micro enterprise Kamarkattu Ecostore has harnessed the power of authentic storytelling; its Insta reels might be a bit jagged around the edges but they inspire trust for their simplicity and unvarnished presentation

SHARON JESSICA MICHAEL

Kamarkattu Ecostore is putting its digital foot impressively forward. Swipe through its Instagram page (@kamarkattu.ecostore) to see how. The micro enterprise puts out visual stories that revel not only in its finished products, but also in the mundane processes that bring those creations to a sustainability shelf.

Before anything else, an outline of this Velachery-based enterprise's place under a green sun. It fits the classic mould of a micro business. If you counted its workforce on your fingers, three fingers would remain unfolded: a seven-member, all-women production team. It offers skincare and homeware essentials with the circumflex accent placed firmly on top of sustainable alternatives. It notes it sources toxin-free, natural native ingredients.

Back to its Insta page, check out these posts. Titled "Plastic free & proud", a reel with visuals of orders being tucked into eco-friendly packaging presents this line: "Every time we get your orders ready, we smile with pride on how much plastic we avoided." And in a series of posts, it wove a visual story around the Yule season in December 2024, "embossing" recognisably Christmas motifs in its sustainable "soaplets (as it calls its small-sized soaps). So, there sat these eco-friendly soaps shaped like Santa, a Christmas tree and a train. This Insta story titled "Soapy's Christmas Story" was accompanied by catchy Yule music. A note that went with it read: "Our girls got so excited with all these cute Christmas soaps and made a little story out of it... we will post the

story one pic every day". And they went on to do just that in the days that followed, creating two characters Bubbles and Soapy made out of their soaplets who would take the narrative forward.

Thendral Manimozhi, founder and prime mover behind Kamarkattu Ecostore laughs at the recent memory: the idea for "Soapy's Christmas Story" came from someone interning with us, she reveals. The reels carry an endearingly personal touch which actually enables the viewer to gloss over the raggedness around the edges that they carry. The reels seem to have been created off the cuff with the staff themselves featuring in them with hurriedly readied scripts. But it is difficult to question their effectiveness, their dilettante quality being their strength as it inspires trust. This micro business' strong digital moorings makes sense when you check its date of origin. It was born in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. A civil engineer with 10 years of experience in sales and marketing, Thendral cranked it following an a-ha moment. It was a moment of truth one that led her to question the effects of using regular toothpaste and soaps. Within the framework of that questioning, she discovered the motivation to create toxin-free products, promote conscious consumerism and also make it an affordable

proposition. The brand set off on its business journey at a leisurely trot, restricting itself to a few products such as bath powder, virgin coconut oils, natural kaja and shampoo bars – the pandemic was looming large after all – and has expanded to deal in around 200 products now. Its product line would have expanded hugely, but in its core, it remains unchanged. Sustainability drives the business, with all the processes, ranging from sourcing to shipping being completely plastic-free. The packaging uses black and white paper, along with reusable or compostable cartons and newspapers as fillers. Even the packaging tape is plastic-free. Thendral underlines the fact that the brand avoids flashy packaging, opting for simple designs, which sometimes affects customer appeal but aligns with its vision of waste-free living.

The micro enterprise does not operate from a showroom, and is essentially a mail-order business and geography is out of the equation. Kamarkattu's production team consists of eight women with a five to six hour daily work schedule to enable them to attend to personal responsibilities without any great difficulty.

Popular products by the brand include shampoo bars, dishwash bars, "takeout dishwash powder", laundry powder and a face scrub made with 30 herbs and flowers in powder form. The brand also resells coir, neem and bamboo products from a cooperative society in Kanyakumari.

Thendral notes that they educate customers on sustainability by continuously reiterating the basics. She emphasises the brand's focus on long-lasting products, holding up as illustration a shaving bar used by a customer for over 1.5 years. The name "Kamarkattu" reflects this philosophy, inspired by the lingering sweetness of the candy and the concept of "naked" products, free of toxins and preservatives. Thendral observes that small sustainable brands often close down due to consumer scrutiny over cost and authenticity, while large brands engaging in greenwashing face less questioning. Despite the challenges, Kamarkattu continues to promote its values of sustainability and conscious consumerism, adds Thendral.



A lighter moment at Kamarkattu Ecostore.

Transforming hearts through arts



A winning team from the previous edition; (below) teams from Chennai Public School and NSN Memorial School. Photos: Special Arrangement

LIFFY THOMAS

On February 2, more than 200 children from various schools will attend the awards ceremony of 'Art to Connect 2.0' at Kalakshetra Foundation in Thiruvananthapuram.

The event marks the culmination of an initiative to connect children from mainstream schools with children who have special needs. In the run-up to this event, both have showcased their skills in music, dance, painting and singing.

More than 100 schools and 300 specially-abled peers, referred to as "buddies", across major cities participated in the second edition. Four teams (each comprising an able-bodied child and a buddy) were selected as the national winners of 'Art to Connect 2.0'. Besides, awards will be presented in other categories such as "Harmony and Diversity", "Transformative Connect" and "Inclusive Creativity".

Winning is not the ultimate aim of this initiative started by Nirmala Krishnan, who has worn various hats including as principal of Mahindra World School and Country Head Education for the Jindal Group.

The event meets one of the criteria of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 10.3 of reducing inequalities and offering equal opportunities to all. The collaboration is also aimed at fostering empathy, promoting art and culture and encouraging children to develop an emotional connection with society.

Shruti Malaar, a Class XI student

'Art to Connect' unites children from mainstream schools with children who have special needs in a special bond that is crowned by creative pursuits. In its second edition now, the initiative is bringing more schools on board



of Chennai Public School, took this initiative forward to get nine students to enrol for the event. With the help of two teacher coordinators their task was to figure out how to bond with the buddies and co-create a piece of art together.

Shruti was assigned the role of videographer-cum-editor where she had to shoot the work of teams to get the best out of them.

"I volunteered for this event as I wanted to overcome my fears of interacting with children with special needs and this role got me to experience nine stories," says Shruti. Wielding a Nikon camera, she captured a variety of emotions as her schoolmates engaged with buddies from Apple Valley Special School.

Nehan, for instance, was paired with a student on the spectrum to work on a piece of art. But when the buddy saw other teams dancing he too wanted to dance. Harshini's buddy did not want to communicate in a certain way and she had to mellow down her conversational style to ensure she felt safe.

"I got to converse and cap-

The process

Schools are required to register with Art to Connect and agree with a set of rules and regulations for the event. There is no entry fee, and every participating team is required to send a one-minute video of their interaction and another one-minute video of their art.

Entries must also be uploaded with a 600-word write-up about their journey. For details, visit linkthedots.online or email linkthedots13@gmail.com

ture so many emotions of excitement, comfort, adaptation during this exercise," says the 17-year-old.

It took some doing for Varnika A., a Class XI student of NSN Memorial School, to teach the dance steps to her buddy Hemanya, who is dyslexic, but the end result was a beautiful bond. "I first made her comfortable asking about her likes and dislikes before we started to practise some steps. What I liked was she was open to learning and I just had to be patient till she got them right," says Varnika.

NSN Group of Schools had 15 students taking part in the event, where the school joined hands with Vatsalya Open Schooling. "We brought students from the Centre

to our campus. While the rapport was built on the same day, a few required more time and a different approach," says Shyamala V., coordinator for this event from the school.

Other noteworthy entries include a national winner from a school at Kamathipura, a neighbourhood with social fractures in Mumbai. "Some schools have told me that their students had an emotional transformation by bonding with a peer," says Nirmala.

There is also an international winner from Tajikistan, Zuhra, who danced with Amir, a boy with speech impairment.

Growing strong

The first edition of 'Art to Connect' was held in 2020 with 20 schools qualifying for the finals. This time, it has grown to more than double the number. Last year, Pune registered the maximum number of participants. This time, Tamil Nadu tops the list.

Nirmala says this is an event for mainstream schools and she expects them to do the ground work of locating a buddy.

"In Delhi, many schools have children with special needs across classes but that is not the case in the South," she says.

Nirmala says the larger goal of Art to Connect is to strengthen the bond and show children the need to cultivate patience, compassion, empathy and gratitude. The jury looks at the effort made by a participant to bond.

As part of the competition, participants also take a pledge that when they grow up and attain positions of power they will try to bring in policies that are inclusive.

"Transformation is what I am looking for and this is just the beginning," says Nirmala, who comes from the pharmaceutical industry and has authored books on education.



Driving on Noombal Road is a nightmare

▼ Noombal Road in Velappanchavadi on January 23.
PHOTOS: VELANKANNI RAJ B



It is a month since the rains stopped and the weather is dry. However, Noombal Road at Velappanchavadi in Thiruverkaadu has

stagnant water lodged in deep and huge potholes.

Regulars complain of motorcyclists falling and sustaining injuries.

“I have fallen thrice from my motorcycle during the rainy season last month. Because the potholes are not visible. During night, it is riskier as the street lights are inadequate,” says a passer-by. It is an interior road linking the Iyyapanthangal stretch of Mount-Poonamallee High Road and Thiruverkaadu on Poonamallee High Road. Residents of Iyyapanthangal also use this road to go to Vanagaram. But it is in a deplorable state.

“This road which comes under the purview of Thiruverkaadu Municipality is in this condition for the past four years. The road has many companies and godowns; many container lorries frequent this road. Hence, this road cannot be laid the way other interior lanes are. It should be fit enough to take heavy vehicles,” says P. Senthil Kumar, a resident of Iyyapanthangal. Open manholes and cables also add to the risk.

Text by L Kanthimathi

Workshop on heritage conservation

Hepzibah Institute of Heritage Conservation is conducting a workshop on conservation and restoration of antiquities of a church from February 3 to 8. Time: From 9.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. For venue details, call 9381008253. According to a press release, no fee will be charged.

Hepzibah Institute of Heritage Conservation is at 21, VOC Street, MGR Nagar.

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Alagiriswamy Road waits for mending exercise



The intersection of Alagiriswamy Road and Lakshmanaswamy Salai in K.K. Nagar is battered.

Besides, the stretch of Alagiriswamy Road near Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply & Sewerage Board station is marked with potholes. Passers-by complain of a damaged electricity box at the footpath near the station.

“Construction work is going on at the premises of CMWSSB station. We often find kids of the construction workers playing near the electricity box in which the cables are exposed,” says a passer-by.

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The route number S30K.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A new route number between Guindy and Kotturpuram

The Metropolitan Transport Corporation has introduced a bus route number between Guindy and Kotturpuram.

Route number S30K (Guindy -Thiru Vi Ka Industrial Estate - Kotturpuram MRTS railway station) will ply through the Estate to stop at Guindy State Multi-Speciality Hospital, Alandur Road and Bazaar Road in Saidapet, Saidapet Metro Station and Kotturpuram railway station.

From the Estate, the buses would leave at 7.10 a.m., 8.40 a.m., 10.05 a.m., and 11.25 a.m., and 12.40 p.m., 2.05 p.m., 3.20 p.m., and 4.40 p.m., said a release.



Special buses for Thai Ammavasai

In view of 'Thai Ammavasai' (January 29), the Tamil Nadu State Express Transport Corporation will be operating additional special buses to Rameshwaram from Chennai city and other cities on January 28.

Buses will be operated from Kallangur Centenary Bus Terminus (KCBT) in Kilambakkam.

On January 28, buses will operate to the pilgrimage town from Coimbatore, Salem and Bengaluru. On January 29, additional special buses will operate from Rameshwaram to Chennai (KCBT), Coimbatore, Salem, and Bengaluru.

The public can book the tickets through www.tnsrc.in and the official TNSTC app.

CMDA launches mobile app for KCBT

Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority has launched a mobile app to enhance the travel experience of commuters from Kallangur Centenary Bus Terminus (KCBT) in Kilambakkam. Available in Tamil and English, it can be downloaded free on Android and iOS platforms. In the app journey planner section, a commuter can reach the terminus using the map, check the availability of buses and find city public transport buses from KCBT to regions across the city (Chennai Bus app).

The app has sections for grie-



vances, feedback, helpline numbers, notice boards, and frequently asked questions. The

app helpline number is 78457 00557.

Two retirement community projects launched



The GT Bharathi Urban Developers Private Limited has launched two retirement community projects – 'Elements Sattva' in Porur and 'Elements Kamalam.'

The Sattva project allows senior citizens to reside within the city. The other project has introduced an 'Independent Seniors' Leasing (ISL) scheme, which allows seniors to lease their homes at 50 percent of the purchase cost, offering investors good rental returns, said a release.

To offer seniors and their families a first-hand experience of retirement homes, the real estate housing firm is conducting an expo at Ethiraja Kalyana Mandapam, TTK Road in Alwarpet that ends on January 26.

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