



Nature and process of aging in patra community: A sociological analysis

■ Mozharul Islam Robin

*Department of Sociology, Institute of Social Science Beytepe Campus, Hacettepe University, ANKARA, TURKEY
(Email: mozharul.islam@hacettepe.edu.tr; robinsoc_01@yahoo.com)*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature and process of aging in Patra Community. Aging is a widely known twentieth century phenomenon. Though many people regard aging as a biological process, in fact, it is created by different cultures. It is observed not only in developed countries but also in developing countries. In Bangladesh, like other developed and developing countries, population aging is also considered natural outcome of demographic transition and here aged population is growing remarkably. In our country, the elderly people face multi-faceted problems. Another thing is that many minority groups, have been living in Bangladesh, are socially excluded from mainstream society. Patra community is one of minority communities. However, the situation of the elderly in Patra community is yet to fully understand. By taking this problem into consideration, The author is interested to explore the nature and process of aging relating it to various aspects of class, gender, income, family structure and age structure of Patra community.

Aging is a widely known concept as it is one of the mostly discussed worldwide concepts. It is also a twentieth century phenomenon. It was first observed in developed countries because of declining trend in fertility which raised many questions regarding social and economic implications of aging, questions like the physical and psychological care of the elderly, institutional arrangements for the aged and private and public finance implications of aging (Messkoub, 1997:1). Though many people regard aging as biological process, in fact it is created by different culture. As a result of development of medical science, life expectancy of people has increased and this is responsible for the growing number of elderly people in a country. Elderly people are the notable part of industrially developed societies where they are treated as differently such as senior citizen, golden-ager, senescent etc. (Rahman and Parveen, 1993-94:33). Aged people are treated differently in different culture and societies. In some societies they are respected highly but in other societies they are regarded as burden/liability, unproductive, difficult, dependent (Schaefer and Lamm, 1995: 357, Hossain, 1998: 198, Rahman and Parveen,

1993-94: 33). From the third decades of twentieth century, sociological thinking has been started about the problems of the elderly and as a result 'Social Gerontology' was established as a distinct discipline in 1970s. In Bangladesh, population aging is also considered natural outcome of demographic transition and here aged population is growing impressively. The number of older people in Bangladesh is expected to increase 173 per cent by 2025 (HelpAge International Report, 1999-2000:129). This demographic transition has been occurred through the process of development which not only has changed the demographic phenomena but also has changed life style, values and outlook of the family and community (Hossain, 1998: 189). Now-a-days, aging is considered a problem in each and every society. "The situations of the elderly in Bangladesh whether they live in urban or rural areas are pitiable" (Hossen, 2005: 82). The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reported that many countries have been experiencing changes in family structure that is the previous traditional extended family system was transforming to nuclear family because of declining trend

in fertility, increasing trend in life expectancy, urbanization, and other changes in population variables and in socio-economic development (UN Report, 1996: 3). Aging is not an individual problem but a problem of the family and of the community. We live in the traditional joint family system but the situation is gradually changing and there is appearing a gradual shift from the joint family system to the nuclear family system. This is happening because of deteriorating economic situation, widespread rural poverty, urbanization, industrialization and modernization. Traditional value systems are also changing rapidly (Kabir, 1992: 47-50, Roy, 2004: 193). Moreover, women's participation in the workforce outside the home is increasing day by day. As a result, they are not able to provide continuous care of the elderly at home. So, the life of many elderly people falls in unhappiness and faces various problems because of these changes. All elderly people suffer from various problems like economic problem, loneliness, social deprivation, health problems, housing, recreation and safety and security. But all elderly people do not face same problems. It depends on their class position (Dandekar, 1996: 16, Mahmud and Islam, 2000: 7). In the contemporary world, ethnicity is one of the most important topics of study as ethnic group has been living all over the world. There are many ethnic groups in our country and among various ethnic groups, Patra community is totally different and is only seen in Sylhet region. It has distinct history, culture, livelihood, language, living patterns and religions etc. The people of this community are known as Laleng in their language and they are also recognized as Pator or Pathor. The Patras are divided into some clans and call their clan as Rai (Hye, 2007: 13, Kamal *et al.*, 2007: 541 and Miah, 2008: 54). As Patra community has distinct culture, social structure, language, it is our concern to find out the nature and process of aging of the community emphasizing on its class structure, social and cultural aspects. So, the present study has a broad objective that is to explore the nature and process of aging in Patra community. There are some other specific objectives *i.e.* to know the class differentiation of the elderly; to know about family structure where the elderly people live; to determine aging by relating it to social and cultural aspects of the community; to explore the difference of aging from that of the mainstream society.

Review of pertinent literature:

Bangladesh is a country where various ethnic communities exist and they have distinct culture. So, it is a multicultural country. The people of various minority groups constitute only about 2 per cent of total population of the country. Among various minority communities Patra community is ignored by the mainstream society (Rafi, 2006, cited in Miah, 2008: 53). Historical analyses show that Patra community has been living in Sylhet region since nearly fourteenth century. Though only limited number of studies

has been done on the Patra community, Miah (2008) tried to make clear the identity and identity crisis of the community. He noted that the society and culture of Patra community maintain double standard because the people of the community are diverted Hindu but the community was not incorporated into Hindu Communities. From the economic point of view, people of this community live under the baseline of poverty. So, the definition of poverty is not applicable in Patra community. Chakrabarti (2000) conducted his study through questionnaire, field administration and interview to get an overview of social, cultural and economic condition of Patra community. Besides this, he analyzed historical data to know about the community. As it is the first research report on Patra community, it has some lacking like detailed economic and cultural aspects were not included in the study report. In Patra community patriarchy is practiced strictly and women are dependent on men. It is practiced in every part of their life like religion, rituals, daily activities etc. Through participant observation it is viewed that material culture is being changed like other aspects of their culture and material culture includes dress, housing, furniture etc. (Hye, 2007). Kabir (1992) regarded aging as a natural process but in recent years it has emerged as a major issue in the developed and developing countries. He stated that aging has various consequences. They range from social security issues and questions of health care for the elderly to labor supply and even cultural values and attitudes towards innovation. When people become aged they face both physical and mental health problems. Dandekar (1996) discussed about the hypotheses and theories of ageing, the socio-demographic profile of the old, interstate variations on the old in India, whether old-age security is possible or not etc. In this book it is assumed that old people face various types of problems like economic, health, non-working status, lack of independence, clash of lifestyles, generation gap and so on. It is also noted that urban elderly are facing so many problems which do not exist for the rural elderly. In the book the emphasis is given on old-age homes but here the care provided by the family for the elderly is not mentioned significantly. The problems faced by elderly women who in most countries significantly outnumber elderly men because women live longer than men. Because of their lower status women are prone to serious economic, social, family and above all health problems. As women live longer than men, they suffer from diseases more. The burden of caring for the elderly is largely borne by women. As a result, women are not only prevented from earning an income which will help support in their old age, their health may also be damaged by the fatigue of care-taking. Nayar (1996) analyzed the situation of the aged in the rapidly changing scenario of technology. She discussed the major issues and concerns in the life of the aged, the implications of these for the future and the impact that much higher percentages of elderly people will have on society. When elderly people do not get proper care from the



family, they are sent to other institutions like old home. Chang (1996) mentioned that low income and education have been found to be highly correlated to poor health in many countries. Older persons, especially older women are disproportionately represented amongst the poor who has important implications on their nutritional status, access to adequate medical care and their physical well-being. Unlike elderly men who may have their wives to depend on when they fall ill, older women are quite likely to have to rely on children and other relatives. Chang (1996) also noted that older women face different health problems compared with older men. A study conducted in Malaysia indicates that at a given older age, women may face more health problems than men (Tey, 1997:107, cited in Chang, 1996:94). Chang also noted that generally in Asia, older persons have a place to live with their children. But with high growth and urbanization rates, massive rural-urban migration and changes in family structure, family support of the elderly has shown signs of weakening and many families find it difficult to care for the elderly.

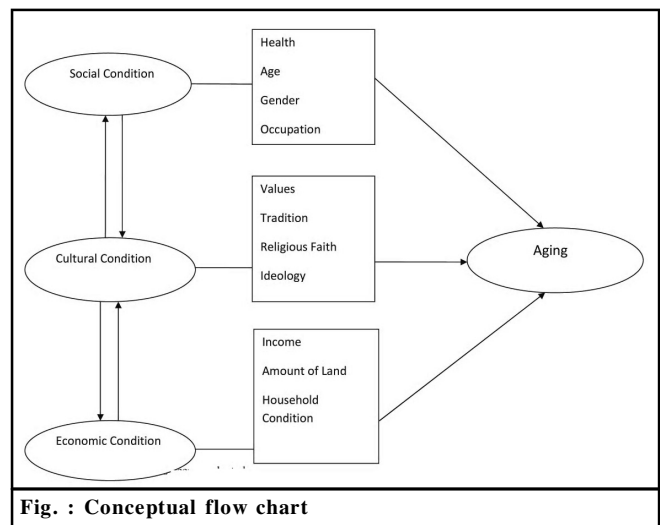
Hossain (1998) states that in Bangladesh the rapid rate of urbanization, industrialization and modernization has a radical impact on traditional family life and also challenges to the traditional care system of the senior citizens. He conducted a study in a suburban of Khulna Metropolitan City (KMC) and shows that in that study area extended family system has broken into nuclear family but filial piety system has still remained. Mahmud and Islam (2000) noted that economic insecurity, social isolation and physical degradation are positively associated with old age. They also showed that because of poor nutritional standard and poor housing and sanitation elderly people suffer from so many diseases. Sagaza (2004) cited that population aging is a demographic phenomenon of the age composition of a population which gives us a powerful influence to change social structures as changes in lifestyles, living conditions, family structure and value systems of people are closely related to the process of population aging. The report shows that aging expands the gender differences in areas like sex ratio, marital status, households and families, health, time use, employment, income and pension and nursing care. It also shows that in Asian countries traditional lifestyles and value systems are still linger strong and people of these countries consider their family to be the base of their living. Chanana and Talwar (2007) mentioned that now India's elderly people are given much attention because of changes in kinship and family organization in the wake of urbanization, industrialization and modernization. The study showed that the joint family system which was a form of social security is disintegrating.

Rajan *et al.* (1999) discussed about the demography of ageing, policies and programme, the living conditions of the elderly etc. They noted that in each country (developed and developing countries) social security is a recent phenomenon

which is deeply influencing the social and economic policy of the country. Social security system aims to help individuals in times of dependency like childhood, old age, sickness, accident and unemployment. Old age is one kind of contingency which can be avoided by careful planning or life-preparatory measures. Moreover, so many researchers *i.e.* Gorman and Heslop (2002); Gupta and Sankar (2003); Kabir *et al.* (2006) etc. paid their attention to highlight aging by relating it to other factors like poverty, policy, reciprocity, health status, malnutrition, health problems etc. of the elderly in South Asia. But it is a matter of sorrow that no sociological research or study about Patra community has been conducted in our country. As a result, there is no appropriate information about the people of this community. We do not know exactly about their religion, rituals, marriage systems, kinship, descent, language, economic and political condition, material cultures etc. Only an anthropological study was made by Hye (2007) on the changed culture of Patra community highlighting its identity crisis. As this work could not provide anything about aging process of this community, through the present study I will try to explore the nature and process of aging of Patra community emphasizing on class structure, social and cultural aspects of the community.

Conceptual flow chart:

The research has been conducted by following both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study is both exploratory and descriptive. Here, I have tried to explore the nature and process of aging in Patra community. I have also tried to explore how the nature and process of aging is being shaped by social, cultural and economic indicators of that community. Besides this, I tried to describe the family structure of the community. The study area Khadimpara union of Sylhet Sadar has been selected purposively. There are five villages in that union where Patra community lives and among these



villages only one village named 'Doloipara' has been selected purposively as the field of my present research. So, I have conducted my study in 6 No. Ward of Doloipara village of Khadimpara union under the district of Sylhet. In the selected village, there are only 31 households and all household heads are considered as the population of my current study. Every household head has been taken into consideration as a unit of analysis of my present research. The family based information has been collected through Baseline Survey. After conducting a survey through baseline survey questionnaire I got the exact number of elderly people in Patra community. The baseline survey shows that there are twenty three aged persons (both male and female) in 6 No. Ward of Doloipara. Firstly I have decided to find out my required information through Focus Group Discussion (FGD). But when I went to the study area, I found that it is not possible for me to do FGD because all elderly people are engaged in different types of tasks and they do not have enough time to gather in one place. So, I have changed my technique. Patra community has patriarchal social system and when I conducted the survey through baseline survey questionnaire, I found that all elderly people are not educated but some are educated and have clear conception about their family, their community and about their lives. Therefore, among them I have selected five cases and talked with them by following a guide questionnaire. The quantitative data have been processed through SPSS and analyzed by some statistical tools. The actual opinion has been represented which has actualized the data analysis process. For in-depth understanding about my research questions I have analyzed five cases in the present research.

Here, it is seen that among the all respondents male respondents are 87.1 per cent and female are only 12.9 per cent. It shows that more than two-thirds of the household heads are male which reflect the patriarchal social system of Patra community. In the case of marital status, more than two-thirds of the household heads were married and they hold 77.4 per cent. Again 9.7 per cent respondents were widower and 12.9 per cent were widow. From this we can assume that women live more days than their counterparts.

Out of all respondents nearly fifty per cent (48.4%) respondents were illiterate and among others only 9.7 per cent were able to write their name, 19.4 per cent had studied up to class three, 16.1 per cent studied up to class six and only 6.4 per cent have studied above class six. The people of this community were backward in education. Here data show that there were more nuclear families which contain 71.0 per cent and the percentage for joint family pattern is 29.0 per cent. It is not because of urbanization and modernization as urbanization or modernization could not touch the community yet. In regard of family members 25.8 per cent households have members between 0 and 4, 54.8 per cent households have members between 5 and 8 and 19.4 per cent households have members

between 9 and 12. So it can be said that most of the household have members between 5 and 8 which reflects nuclear family pattern of this community. Among the all household heads, maximum household heads were day laborer and the percentage was 35.5 per cent. Moreover, 12.9 per cent respondents were house maker but a few respondents are engaged in other occupations like workshop worker 3.2 per cent, saw mill worker 3.2 per cent, rickshaw puller 3.2 per cent, ceramics factory worker 6.5 per cent, farmer 6.5 per cent, driver 3.2 per cent, mason 9.7 per cent, NGO worker 3.2 per cent and carpenter 3.2 per cent. But only 9.7 per cent respondents have other occupation. It shows us that people of this community were engaged in diverse occupation rather than their traditional occupation of collecting wood from the forest and preparing and selling char coal.

In Patra community there were only 23 persons whose age was 50 and above. Out of total households more than half households don't have aged people and it holds 51.6 per cent. On the other hand, in eight households each has one aged person, in six households each has two aged people and another one has three aged people. From this data we can assume that the life expectancy rate of the people of this community was lower than that of mainstream society. Among the respondents of all households, 32.3 per cent household heads were the only earning member of their family. But in some households household head self and sons were the earning members (25.8%) and in other households sons were the only earning member and it includes 12.9 per cent households. Furthermore, only a few households have other income generating persons like respondents' brother, daughter and spouse. Among the respondents some respondents don't have any income and their income was nil and they hold 29.0 per cent. Most of the respondents' monthly income was between 1000 and 3000 and they bear 48.4 per cent. Only 3.2 per cent respondents have monthly income more than 6000. These reflect the economic condition of the household head as well as the family.

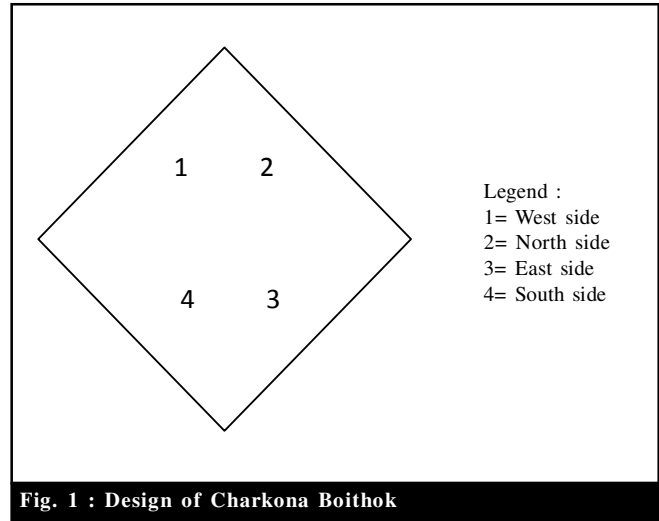
Moreover, out of all households nearly two-thirds households have only dwelling place (71.0 %). 16.1 per cent households have dwelling place and cultivable land and only 12.9 per cent households have dwelling place, cultivable land and a number of cows. This also shows the miserable condition of the household. Out of total households 19.4 per cent households have income from agriculture as other sources of household income. But only 9.7 per cent households have income from business and 3.2 per cent from other sources. Here the striking matter is that most of the households don't have any other sources of income and it covers 67.7 per cent households of Patra community. They lead a very poor life which is also reflected in the materials used to construct their dwelling house. In Patra community three kinds of house can be seen like Kacha ghor (house made of mud, bamboo and leaves), Semi-pacca (house made of bricks and tin) and building.



More than fifty per cent households (51.6%) have kacha ghor, 41.9 per cent households have semi pacca house and only 6.5 per cent households have building. In this community most of the houses are kacha constructed mostly in some cases with matir talia (mud) and tiner chala (roof made of tin) and in other cases with echor (bamboo stick), matir talia and tiner chala. But only 6.5 per cent houses are constructed with concrete. Here 22.6 per cent respondents don't have their spouse and among them 12.9 per cent female respondents lost their husband and 9.7 per cent lost their wives. The age of most respondents' spouse was below 35 years. Moreover, only 12.9 per cent spouses' age was 50 years and more. The mean age of spouse was 26.61 years and median age 30 years. It proves that in Patra community the age of most of the household heads and their counterparts is below 50 years. Moreover, 12.9 per cent respondents don't have any male child while only 3.2 per cent respondents have 6 male offspring, 25.8 per cent have one male offspring, 22.6 per cent have 2, 29.0 per cent have 3 and 6.5 per cent respondents have 4 male offspring. Again, 80.6 per cent respondents don't have any married male offspring while 16.1 per cent have one married male offspring and only 3.2 per cent have two married male offspring. On the other hand, 22.6 per cent respondents don't have female offspring while 38.7 per cent have only one offspring, 19.4 per cent have two and 16.1 per cent respondents have three female offspring. But only 3.2 per cent respondents have seven female offspring. Furthermore, 90.3 per cent respondents do not have married female offspring but 3.2 per cent respondents have one, 3.2 per cent have two and another 3.2 per cent respondents have four married female offspring. So it can be said that older people get better nursing from their female offspring who currently stay at home.

Furthermore, case analyses show that in Patra community older people are considered as a member of different class like mainstream society. Older people also think that they are not as like as other people like youths because in any judicial board or meeting of the community they are given seat in a particular side of the meeting. Their meetings are held at Mondir (temple) where they say their prayers and the meetings are known as Charkona Boithok (Four angles meeting). The elderly people took their seat in the right side of the angle and rest of the people took their seat in other three sides of the angle. They are given chance to express their opinion and also evaluated their opinion. The design of Charkona Boithok is as follows (Fig. 1).

As the community is completely patriarchal and strictly conservative, older women are not allowed to participate in the judicial or any other meetings. He also noted that neither older women nor any other women are allowed to join in the meeting. In Patra community life expectancy rate is not as like as the mainstream society because most of the people are illiterate and poor. They have to work hard from the very first of their



lives to maintain their livelihood. As a result, after the age of forty they live in broken health. In their old age, they do not get proper nutritious food and in consequence they die in the age between 50 and 60. Here, as people are not engaged in any Govt. service, age is not the main denominator of aging. Unlike mainstream society, the people who are 50 or over 50 are treated as aged. The people whose body skin becomes loose and who have grandchildren are also treated as elderly. But in Patra community the main determinant of aging is the strength of body to do work. Another thing is that once upon a time Bangali Muslims are not allowed to mix with the people of Patra community because they would think that if their children mix with the Muslim children, the character of their children will wither away. Remembering their ancestor King Gour Gubind the people noted that though their ancestor would not take cow's milk, they take cow's milk. But they mentioned seriously that since Krishno (the religious God) would take cow's milk, they also take cow's milk and claimed that they are the original Hindu and followers of Sonathon dhorma (ancient religion). Some women think that being aged, having grand children is not the only determinants of aging. Those who cannot walk and are not able to do works are treated as elderly. Though all decisions are taken at Mondir by the men, they don't have any complain regarding this because their religion and culture fixed it. They also noted that though they do not join and participate in community meeting, they get the proper respect from the younger. Culturally they are distinct from Bangali and religiously they are distinct from Bangali Hindu. Case analyses show that unlike Hindu Community, their community has no caste or class systems. Now they are the people of one caste. But the elderly people are respected by all. Young generations believe that it is determined by culture and religion of their community that they have to take care of their older parents and they take it as their obligation. The people of this community rarely have any

free time to enjoy because they have to engage themselves in hard work for the maintenance of their family. Since the people of this community have been living in hilly areas, from the early of their life they had to struggle for their survival. As a result, they even know when they became aged. They know it when they realize that they have not enough physical ability to do work. Nevertheless, though every elderly is treated equally in Patra community, those who have better economic condition they are treated highly. In their community meetings they get extra honor and privilege and in many cases their opinions get priority. The people of Patra community are in identity crisis because they have dual identity as they celebrate all of the Hindu rituals as well as some of their own rituals. One of their own rituals is 'Gayebi Bolicched' (Invisible sacrifice) which distinguishes them from Bangali Hindu. Meanwhile, most of the people of this community are hardcore poor and because of poor economic condition, they become aged earlier and there are a very few people in this community whose age is 60 and above.

Conclusion and recommendations:

This paper explores the nature and process of aging in Patra community. As country's population is growing older slowly, it is needed to know about this matter among the people of an ethnic community *i.e.* Patra community. It is observed that in this community population aging is not gender neutral. Widow rate is high than widower at older ages. In mainstream society male population is older than their female counterparts and it is also true for the people of this community. In Patra community death rate among male older people is higher than that of female older people. The reason is that male population works hard outside the family and female has to stay in the household. As a result, they lost their health quickly. Another thing is that widow female elderly feel lonely and they just wait for the final day of their lives. So, marital status is a demographic characteristic of people and is much more complex culturally and socially defined event. It involves biological, social, economic, legal, and in many cases religious aspects. It is well known as nuptial. Widowhood status of elderly can be viewed as an indicator of elderly living arrangement in the family. Widow elderly feel lonely and their mental strength weakens day by day. So, it is worthwhile to study elderly status in a family or in a society according to their marital status. Another thing is that marital status can strongly affect the emotional and economic well being of older persons, particularly those with an illness or disability, as it determines living arrangements and the availability of care givers. In the family environment elderly people are treated in a good manner. Their son, unmarried daughters, daughters-in-law take care of them because they think that it is their moral duty imposed by their society and culture to look after their parents at their later age. There is no chance to deny it and if anybody rejects his older parents, he

is being punished and made him bound to obey the social and cultural obligation. In general, older men are more likely to live with a spouse than older women because of a combination of factors, including the higher life expectancy of women, the tendency of men to marry women who are younger than they are. The implication of such situation is that older men are more likely than older women to receive assistance from their spouses, especially when their health fails. The proportion of men with spouses is considerably higher than those of women with spouses in Patra community.

Moreover, the data show that among the total population there are only 23 older people in this community and among them only 11 persons are over 55 years which reflects that both male and female die at their earlier age. It is because they don't have proper nutrition and they have to do hard work. In most cases household head is the only earning member and it is not possible for him to provide balanced diet for the family. As a result, their offspring are not in good health and poverty is appeared in their body structure. Their children have to leave school early and engage as workers in various types of works. Furthermore, in Patra community there is a social and cultural recognition that at community meeting or at any judicial meeting held at Mondir nobody but elderly men will take the place at the south side of their so called four angles meeting where no woman is allowed to join. By analyzing the cases it is clear that Patra community is not gender-neutral and there exists inequality in different form. So, we can come to the conclusion that there are some similarities and differences between Patra community and the mainstream society in the process of being aged. Though Govt. has taken some initiatives for the betterment of the elderly, the elderly people of this community remain outside of the facilities. Therefore, the present study may help the government to get an overview about the elderly of Patra community that will help in making and implementing policy regarding the betterment of elderly people of this community. Furthermore, the research findings may be beneficiary for the sociologists in getting knowledge about the nature and process of being aged in Patra community and I think aging will be an amazing research topic for the students of sociology.

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