

Breaking the Caste Threshold: Sadalakshmi's Struggle for Dalit Dignity and Political Recognition in *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*

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Article Received: 28/07/2026

Article Accepted: 30/08/2026

Published Online: 31/08/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.536

Abstract:

The life of T. N. Sadalakshmi is presented in Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* as a significant historical account of Dalit political assertion and the fight for recognition and dignity in Telangana. Sadalakshmi, who was born within the Bhangi/Valmiki community, came into the public eye during a period when social and political structures were heavily influenced by caste hierarchy. Her political career serves as an example of how a member of one of the most socially stigmatised groups could overcome caste discrimination and hold important positions in Andhra Pradesh's democratic institutions. This essay looks at Sadalakshmi's fight to cross the caste barrier via institutional action, public protest, political engagement, Dalit mobilisation, and Madiga rights advocacy. Her struggle with untouchability, her actions as Endowment Minister, her claim of Dalit access to temple institutions, and her subsequent participation in the Scheduled Caste subcategorisation movement are all specifically examined in this book. According to Satyanarayana, she was a leader with "immense confidence in herself" and "not even an iota of inhibition and inferiority." Her political career serves as an example of how, when socially marginalised populations reject forced inferiority, dignity turns into a form of resistance. The paper, which draws on Chenamallu, Shyamamma, Dahiwele, Narender, Thummapudi Bharati, Guenther, Guru, and Rege, contends that Sadalakshmi's political life changed caste identity from a sign of marginalisation to a foundation for political awareness, group representation, and calls for acknowledgement.

Keywords: Sadalakshmi, Dalit dignity, caste struggle, political acknowledgement, Madiga identity, and Dalit political consciousness are some of the keywords.

Introduction

In India's past, caste has been one of the most potent social stratification systems. Beyond religious and ceremonial customs, it has affected social mobility, political representation, access to public institutions, cultural appreciation, and human dignity. In the

past, Dalit people have been excluded from areas that dominant communities claimed as their own due to caste. However, the rise of Dalit leaders who opposed this marginalisation by joining democratic institutions and using political representation as a tool for social assertion is also documented in the political history of independent India. In this history, T. N. Sadalakshmi holds a significant position.

Sadalakshmi: *The Political Rebel* by Y. B. Satyanarayana recounts the life of a notable Telangana political figure whose career illustrates the potential and constraints of Dalit presence in mainstream politics. Sadalakshmi was a member of one of the most stigmatised Dalit communities, the Bhangi. As a result, her political career meant a challenge to caste-based presumptions about who could hold political authority rather than just being an individual journey into public life.

The societal reality of caste discrimination is illustrated by her early experiences. According to the account, she visited a political gathering and found that the individuals there were divided based on caste. She realised that “everyone around her were from the Harijian community while the people sitting in the room were all from the upper castes,” according to Satyanarayana (47). There was an instant political reaction to the experience. “Mr. P.V., you are dehumanising and insulting us,” she said. I’ll object (47). Because it opposes the normalisation of caste discrimination, her remark is noteworthy.

The event also highlights a discrepancy between the oppressed’s awareness and the reaction that people used to caste system would anticipate. Such behaviours happen on a daily basis, according to one of her followers, and “we never took any serious note of it” (47). Sadalakshmi, on the other hand, rejects this normalisation. “No, you should protest. It’s a social evil,” she maintains (47). Therefore, the resistance to accept prejudice as commonplace is linked to caste consciousness in the biographies.

Caste barriers are further challenged by her political ascent. She was regarded as a leader of Dalit Bahujan groups and went on to become a minister, legislator, and Deputy Speaker. According to the biography, she had leadership roles inside the Arundatis and the Backward Class Federation in addition to becoming General Secretary of the All India Valmiki Sabha’s Hyderabad branch. As a result, she became a political representation of larger victimised communities rather than being limited to a certain identity.

Her nomination as Endowment Minister was also noteworthy since it allowed a Dalit woman from the scavenging group to join an organization that had previously been run by religious leaders from higher castes. Because “she was from the scavenging community, the lowest of the lower castes,” according to Satyanarayana, Brahmin priests objected to her presence (66). Her answer was institutional change rather than accommodation.

Thus, Sadalakshmi's political career provides a valuable case study regarding the connection between democratic representation and caste identity. She fought against the caste presumptions ingrained in social and political structures in addition to trying to get into politics. Her subsequent endorsement of Madiga activism and Scheduled Caste subcategorisation serves as another evidence that acknowledging internal distinctions within Dalit communities is a necessary component of political recognition.

According to the current study, Sadalakshmi's political career symbolises a shift from caste marginalisation to political acceptance. Her fight shows that dignity is actively demanded via organization, protest, representation, and institutional intervention rather than being passively accepted.

Review of Literature

Dr. Chenamallu Visweswara Rao "Dalit Women and Their Journey toward Self-Emancipation" (2026) offers a crucial conceptual framework for comprehending Dalit political agency. Sadalakshmi's political career shows that Dalit freedom cannot be reduced to reform carried out by others, which makes the emphasis on self-emancipation especially helpful for understanding her. Her own political activities upend the caste system and give marginalised groups a place in democratic institutions.

According to Gogu Shyamamma's doctoral dissertation, "Reading Caste Histories via Biographies: A Case Study of Dalit Women of Telangana" (2018) biography is a crucial technique for reconstructing caste histories. Her method is especially pertinent to *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* since Satyanarayana's biography reconstructs significant histories of Dalit political mobilisation in Telangana in addition to an individual's career. As a result, Sadalakshmi's life serves as a historical record that can be used to analyse Dalit communities' political experiences.

In his assessment of Dahiwele Mangesh "Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel" (2021) emphasises how remarkable Sadalakshmi's political accomplishment was. He notes that she was a member of the Bhangi community before rising to the position of Deputy Speaker of the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly and Minister for Endowments. In a "male dominated upper caste orientated field of politics," Dahiwele highlights the importance of her involvement in politics (Dahiwele). His observation backs with the claim made in this study that Sadalakshmi's political presence subverted caste-based presumptions about political power.

Muddepaka Narender. "Political representation is a key tactic for empowerment" (2023) according to research on Dalit women's political engagement. According to Narender, communities may advocate for issues impacting their social development when Dalit women participate in politics (Narender 1497–1500). This concept explains the significance of Sadalakshmi's participation in political institutions as a representation of

historically marginalised communities, even though the current paper focuses on caste rather than gender.

A more comprehensive historical framework for comprehending the rise of Dalit voices in Telugu cultural and political life may be found in Thummapudi Bharati's "The History of Telugu Dalit Literature" (2008). Sadalakshmi's political history is part of the broader process through which Dalit groups started questioning prevailing portrayals and claiming their own histories, which makes her work pertinent (Bharati).

The significance of life narratives in the development of political subjectivity is illustrated by Guenther Julia's "research on auto/biographical writing and subjectivity creation among Dalit writers in Telangana" (2021). Her method contributes to the idea that biography is more than just a chronicle of specific incidents. Caste identity can be recreated as political consciousness and action in a Dalit political biography (Guenther 355–72).

Guru Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1998) offers a crucial theoretical viewpoint on Dalit representation and voice. Guru's approach highlights how Dalit individuals communicate from a particular social place and how universal categories are insufficient to capture their experiences (Guru 80–85). Therefore, it is possible to interpret Sadalakshmi's political statements and public actions as ways that caste oppression is expressed in public.

Another important paradigm for understanding Dalit life narratives as counter-histories is found in Rege Sharmila. "Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Dalit Women's Testimonios" (2006). Rege illustrates the significance of Dalit women's testimonies in questioning prevailing modes of representation and knowledge. In a similar vein, Sadalakshmi's biography aids in the reconstruction of a political past that has frequently been excluded from prevailing accounts of Indian political leadership (Rege).

Objectives

There are six goals for the study. It first looks at how caste inequality is portrayed in *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*. It also examines how Sadalakshmi constructed Dalit political identity and dignity. Thirdly, it examines her opposition to caste exclusion and untouchability in public institutions. Fourth, it looks at how she helped turn political representation into a tool for Dalit acknowledgement. Fifth, it examines her involvement in the Madiga movement and the need for the subcategorisation of Scheduled Castes. Lastly, it assesses Sadalakshmi's political career's relevance to Telangana's larger history of Dalit political consciousness.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative textual analysis of *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* by Y. B. Satyanarayana. A careful analysis is done on a few texts that deal with caste discrimination, Dalit identity, untouchability, political representation, temple institutions,

Madiga mobilisation, and political acknowledgement. Conceptual and historical support is provided by secondary research by Chenamallu, Shyamamma, Dahiwele, Narender, Bharati, Guenther, Guru, and Rege.

Discussion

Caste Identity and the Development of Political Awareness

Sadalakshmi's caste placement is where her political significance starts. According to the biography, one of the most marginalised groups in Dalit society is the Bhangi community, to whom she belonged. As a result, her entry into politics upended a social structure where social respectability and authority were strongly correlated with caste position. She used her caste location as a foundation for political assertion rather than giving it up to construct her political identity.

According to the biography, she grew closer to her local community following her political setback. In addition to holding leadership roles in various organisations that supported marginalised people, she was chosen General Secretary of the All India Valmiki Sabha's Hyderabad branch. According to Satyanarayana, "she was a leader for all the Dalit Bahujan people in those days" (47). Because it illustrates how caste identity has expanded into collective political representation, this description is significant.

Chenamallu's theory of self-emancipation offers a helpful framework for comprehending this evolution. The ability of oppressed communities and their representatives to assert agency, as opposed to just receiving compassion or reform from dominant groups, is essential to Dalit political empowerment. Sadalakshmi's political career serves as an example of this idea since she frequently used her institutional power to oppose actions that denigrated Dalit communities.

Addressing Untouchability

Sadalakshmi's meeting with overt untouchability at a political event is one of the most illuminating moments in the narrative. She learns that individuals from higher castes are kept apart from Dalits. She is shocked by the incidence because it takes place in a political setting that openly opposes untouchability.

"You are insulting and humiliating us," is her quick reply. I'll object (47). Her remarks turn what seems to be a common social behaviour into a political problem. The argument that this kind of discrimination is just a normal part of life does not sit well with her.

The fact that another Dalit participant informs her that these behaviours are commonplace and have not been questioned makes this moment very noteworthy. Different phases of caste consciousness are demonstrated by the differences in their answers. Sadalakshmi understands that aggressive resistance must replace passive endurance. Her opinion that caste prejudice needs to be publicly addressed is evident in her suggestion that "you should protest" and that untouchability is "a social evil" (47).

As a result, the experience established one of her political personality's key traits: she won't let caste discrimination go unnoticed through repetition. Making caste injustice apparent is essential to her political awareness.

Overcoming Political Institutions' Caste Barrier

Caste barriers are being challenged by Sadalakshmi's political career. Because she joined an institution where dominant communities controlled most political authority, her presence in the legislative assembly was significant historically.

According to Satyanarayana, she was a legislator for ten years, from 1957 to 1967, before rising to the position of deputy speaker and then minister. Because of her political success, a woman from the severely stigmatised Dalit community could now hold constitutional office, creating a new symbolic possibility.

Her power was more than just symbolic. She had the authority to punish even influential politicians in her capacity as Deputy Speaker. She forcefully told the Chief Minister, "Will you please take your seat, Honourable Chief Minister?" as he tried to respond before the relevant minister could. The event serves as an example of how holding political power could be used to question hierarchical presumptions.

This episode is significant in ways that go beyond personality. Sadalakshmi shows that real authority, not merely a token presence, is necessary for Dalit political representation. When the representative wields institutional power, recognition takes on significance.

Access to Religious Institutions for Dalits

One of the most direct conflicts between caste hierarchy and constitutional authority in the biography occurred as a result of Sadalakshmi's appointment as Endowment Minister. Her presence in temple institutions disproved the notion that only members of the ruling classes had access to places of worship.

Because she was from "the scavenging community, the lowest of the lower castes," according to Satyanarayana, Brahmin priests were against her (66). As a result, the caste system in religious organisations was directly challenged by her role as Endowment Minister. Her changes were just as important. In addition to advocating for the training and appointment of educated Dalits as temple priests, she invited Dalit members into temple trust boards. Hereditary dominance over religious authority was called into question by such an intervention.

At Tirupati, she had her first significant conflict. Because of her caste, the chief priest was reluctant to honour her. In response, Sadalakshmi questioned the Chief Minister's silence, saying, "How could you remain silent when the purohit doubts the validity of the constitution?(67).

Her politics are summed up in this moment. Sadalakshmi maintains that constitutional power must triumph when caste hierarchy and constitutional equality collide. Her self-respect turns into political opposition.

Dalit Dignity and Political Recognition

In Sadalakshmi's political life, dignity and recognition go hand in hand. Caste prejudice operates by giving some communities a lower social standing. By proving that individuals of those groups have equal political authority, political recognition subverts this hierarchy. According to Satyanarayana, Sadalakshmi had "immense confidence in herself" and "not even an iota of inhibition and inferiority in her face" (109). These findings are significant because caste hierarchy aims to create both material exclusion and a psychological sense of inferiority.

Her actions show that she does not internalise inferiority based on caste. According to the biography, whether she spoke to the prime minister or a regular political employee, her "tone and tenor was the same" (109). Thus, the idea of human equality is embodied in her political behaviour.

Here, Guru's focus on the Dalit voice is helpful. The right to speak with authority from one's own social location as well as the right to be represented are both components of political dignity. Such power is established via Sadalakshmi's remarks and conflicts.

Representation of Dalits and Bahujans

Sadalakshmi's political identification grew outside of her neighbourhood. She joined a Dalit-Bahujan political group and spoke for larger groups impacted by caste prejudice. This broader political role is demonstrated by her leadership roles in the Valmiki Sabha and other organisations. As a result, her political representation functioned on two levels. She represented Dalit groups in mainstream political institutions on one level. In another, she spoke for Dalit issues in Dalit political groups. This dual position was important since independent Dalit organisations would not always have access to state authority, while mainstream political parties might marginalise caste-specific issues. The challenging gap between these political realms was held by Sadalakshmi.

The importance of her accomplishment is highlighted by Dahiwele's view that she entered a "male dominated upper caste orientated field of politics." Her presence questioned the notion that political power should continue to be concentrated within dominant social groupings as well as the social isolation of Dalits (Dahiwele).

Internal Caste Recognition and the Madiga Question

Sadalakshmi's concern for inequity among Scheduled Caste communities was one of the most significant facets of her later political activism. She contended that not all Dalit communities benefited equally from Scheduled Caste reservations. Her worries that the Madiga community lagged behind the Mala community and that certain groups benefited disproportionately from reservations are documented in her biography. Instead of advocating for the "vertical development of only one community among Dalits," she pushed for

“horizontal uniform development among the Dalits” (109). Because it presents a more nuanced explanation of caste recognition, this position is important. Treating all Scheduled Castes as a single, homogenous group is not sufficient for recognition. Communities that fall under the Scheduled Caste categorisation may have varying levels of representation and historical histories. As a result, Sadalakshmi’s politics shifts from broad Dalit representation to more specific caste identification. Within the larger Scheduled Caste framework, she sought acknowledgement for Madiga-specific experiences.

The Need for Sub-Classification

One significant stage of this political evolution is represented by the Madiga movement. According to the biography, the Madiga movement called for the A, B, C, and D categories to get a proportionate share of the Scheduled Caste reservation quota. Sadalakshmi was crucial in defining and popularising this desire. She brought together Madigas from all around Andhra Pradesh for the AdiJambavaSammelan at Nizam College. The gathering developed into a significant political forum for talking about under-representation.

The political leaders she held accountable for unequal representation were directly challenged in her speech. When advocating jobs for Malas and Madigas, she claimed that one minister used “two different coloured pens” (115). The episode shows her readiness to publicly address internal disparities within Dalit politics, whether it is interpreted as a particular political accusation or as part of the biography’s portrayal of her political vocabulary.

The conference drew a sizable crowd and sparked a broader political discussion over Madiga representation. The tragedy is also linked in the biography to the subsequent growth of the Madiga Reservation PorataSamithi.

Thus, Sadalakshmi’s politics demonstrate that fair representation in Dalit institutions is inextricably linked to Dalit dignity.

Caste Resistance via Political Leadership

Sadalakshmi’s resistance to sacrifice her values was closely linked to her leadership style. Her political power was not just derived from her position in government. In fact, the book frequently demonstrates that despite her lack of institutional power, she continued to be vocal.

This trait is seen in her reaction to powerful political figures during the Telangana struggle. Sadalakshmi became one of the leaders in charge of carrying on the Telangana agitation after Chenna Reddy was incarcerated in 1969. Chenna Reddy said, “How dare you ask me?” in response to her inquiry on the management of public funds. “Yes, I will definitely ask you,” was her clear response. You are responsible for the public funds (83).

According to the biography, some leaders from higher castes felt uneasy about a Dalit lady spearheading the initiative. As a result, the caste expectations ingrained in local politics were upended by her leadership.

Her political dedication is further evidenced by her choice to donate her personal belongings to support the Telangana movement. Her claim that she did not want the movement to end “because of its dalit leadership” is documented in the biography (83). This assertion is crucial to comprehending the connection between political recognition and caste. She realised that powerful political forces may utilise her Dalit identity as a means of undermining her authority.

Constitutionalism, Caste, and Institutional Reform

Sadalakshmi's political actions show a great dedication to constitutional values. She understood governmental authority as a means of enforcing constitutional equality, as seen by her attitude to untouchability and her interventions in temple management.

It is especially significant that she confronts the temple priest. In a contemporary constitutional state, the priest's reluctance to acknowledge her authority symbolised the persistence of the caste system. In response, she insisted that the Chief Minister uphold constitutional values instead of caving in to long-standing caste customs.

Similar challenges to established structures were made by her innovations in temple management. Her support for Dalit priests and the inclusion of Dalits on temple trust boards were examples of efforts to democratise organisations that had traditionally excluded Dalits. A broader conceptual foundation for understanding these interventions is offered by Ambedkar's criticism of caste. In order to eradicate caste, institutional behaviours that perpetuate caste hierarchy must be dismantled in addition to formal equality. Therefore, it is possible to understand Sadalakshmi's political interventions as realistic attempts to incorporate equality into institutional practice.

The Counter-History of Biography

The significance of Satyanarayana's biography lies in its preservation of elements of Dalit political history that are often overlooked in traditional narratives of Indian politics. Sadalakshmi's career shows that current election advances were not the first time Dalits were involved in politics. In the early decades following independence, Dalit leaders were already contesting caste systems in legislative and political institutions.

In this case, Shyamamma's emphasis on biographies as resources for comprehending caste histories is especially pertinent. Sadalakshmi's life serves as a means of reconstructing the political history of Telangana's Dalit community.

In a similar vein, Guenther's analysis of autobiographical and biographical literature clarifies how storytelling shapes political subjectivity. Sadalakshmi's identification as a political subject develops as a result of her many run-ins with establishments that try to categorise her based on her caste.

As a result, the biography serves two purposes: it documents a person's political career and reconstructs the history of caste opposition.

Transitioning from Social Shame to Political Power

The transition from caste stigma to governmental authority is arguably the most significant change in Sadalakshmi's life. She opposed exclusion from the same social identity that the dominant society used to designate her as inferior.

Her selection as Endowment Minister, her role as Deputy Speaker, and her presence in the Assembly proved that caste status could not properly dictate political authority. This idea was especially evident when she confronted the temple priest.

According to the biography, she maintained her authority whether she was "in power or out of power" and had "not even an iota of inhibition and inferiority" (109). Her political personality is encapsulated in this expression. Sadalakshmi believed that authority derived from conviction rather than just position.

Here, Chenamallu's idea of self-emancipation is helpful once more. Rejecting internalised inferiority and turning political identification into agency are necessary steps toward achieving dignity. Sadalakshmi's political career serves as an example of this procedure.

Caste Acknowledgement Beyond Tokenism

The limitations of symbolic representation are also illustrated by Sadalakshmi's existence. Caste inequality does not always disappear when a Dalit is appointed to a political position. Caste discrimination could coexist with constitutional position, as demonstrated by her experience in the Endowment Ministry.

The opposition she faced from temple authorities demonstrates the distinction between social recognition and institutional power. As a minister, she had legal authority, but old caste systems tried to undermine her social validity.

So her answer was really important. She used her position to oppose institutional exclusion rather than taking on symbolic office. Because recognition was linked to structural change, it gained significance.

Her support for Dalit involvement in priesthood and temple trust boards shows that she aimed to increase political representation in establishments that have historically been dominated by dominant castes.

Collective Mobilisation and Caste Consciousness

Eventually, Sadalakshmi's politics shifted from individual progress to group mobilisation. Her backing of the Madiga campaign serves as an example of how political leadership takes on significance when it links individual representation with group aspirations. This change is exemplified by the AdiJambavaSammelan. She united Madigas from all over Andhra Pradesh and turned a particular complaint about reservation representation into a significant public political issue.

This mobilisation is significant because it shows that political organization may result from caste consciousness. A collective call for institutional reform arises from the community's perception of unequal representation.

Narender's focus on political engagement sheds light on this procedure. Dalit communities may be able to express their concerns and have an impact on public institutions through political representation (Narender 1497–1500).

The Dignity Politics

The core of Sadalakshmi's caste opposition is the politics of dignity. Her refusal to accept social inferiority is the root of her protest against untouchability, her conflict with temple authorities, and her support for Madiga representation.

As a result, dignity is not shown as an impersonal moral attribute. It turns becomes a political activity. She turns personal humiliation into a public constitutional issue when she informs the Chief Minister that it is unacceptable to remain silent in the face of caste discrimination.

The notion that Dalit communities should continue to be appreciative of their limited representation is also called into question by her politics. She expected democratic systems to provide substantive equality, as seen by her desire for proportional recognition within Scheduled Caste institutions.

Because Dalit narratives often turn humiliating experiences into claims to dignity and political legitimacy, Rege's study on Dalit testimonies is pertinent. The biography of Sadalakshmi undergoes a similar metamorphosis.

Sadalakshmi and the Growth of Dalit Politics

Sadalakshmi's career has been significant overall because she has expanded Dalit political space. She questioned the presumptions guiding those viewpoints rather than merely holding positions established by the political system.

She used her procedural power as Deputy Speaker. She opposed caste discrimination in religious institutions while serving as Endowment Minister. She mobilised Dalit communities as a political organiser. She questioned disparities in Scheduled Caste representation as a supporter of Madiga sub-categorization.

As a result, her political journey exposes multiple levels of caste resistance. Resistance to direct untouchability is the first. Resistance to political marginalisation is the second. The third is opposition to the established caste system. Resistance to unequal representation within Dalit groups is the fourth.

Her political life is especially significant for modern Dalit studies because of her multi-layered opposition.

Sadalakshmi's Recognition Legacy

In the conclusion, the biography portrays Sadalakshmi as a political figure whose importance goes beyond the positions she held. Her challenges to caste barriers are what make her significant historically.

Her contribution to the "socio-political awakening and empowerment" of underprivileged people is described in the introduction, which also highlights her dedication to social justice and Dalit emancipation.

Her continued interest in caste-based political issues is further evidenced by her support for the MadigaDandora campaign and her conviction that the Scheduled Caste classification was “genuine and democratic.”

Therefore, Sadalakshmi’s legacy is found in the political vocabulary she contributed to, which includes protests against untouchability, constitutional equality, Dalit representation, communal dignity, and acknowledgement of forgotten Dalit sub-castes. Her life serves as evidence that overcoming the caste barrier is a continuous process. Oppressed communities infiltrate institutions, question their policies, seek acknowledgement, and change the definition of political authority through this ongoing process.

Conclusion

Sadalakshmi’s life is portrayed in Y. B. Satyanarayana’s *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* as a potent tale of political acceptance and caste resistance. The caste presumptions surrounding political authority were challenged by her journey from the Bhangi community to the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly, Deputy Speakership, and ministerial office. Her opposition to untouchability, conflict with temple officials, support for Madiga sub-categorization, and advocacy for Dalit involvement in religious institutions show that representation meant more to her than holding public office. It meant claiming dignity and changing institutions. Her political career demonstrates that when social identity transforms into political awareness and group action, caste opposition becomes transformative. As a result, Sadalakshmi becomes a significant character in the history of Dalit political assertion in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

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