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## Ashramas and Mathas in Hinduism: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Societal Roles

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### Abstract

The institution of 'ashram' (Spiritual hermitage) and 'matha' (Monastery) has been integral to Hindu religious traditions. Originating from ancient Vedic times, these establishments were initially spiritual refuges that evolved into centers for religious and worldly education, anchored by the figure of a 'guru' (Teacher). The role of the guru, although not explicitly mentioned in the earliest Vedic texts, became prominent in the Upanishads and other Hindu scriptures, symbolizing the dispelling of ignorance and the guiding of spiritual realization. Historically, both ashrams and mathas engaged with society through education, healthcare, and social welfare, shaping religious and secular life. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, founded by Swami Vivekananda, exemplifies this engagement by integrating spiritual practice with social service, promoting practical Vedanta and humanitarian efforts across India. Similarly, the Art of Living Foundation, led by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, focuses on stress relief, spiritual growth, and global humanitarian initiatives, emphasizing seva (Selfless service). Contrary to the perception of being isolated spiritual enclaves, ashrams and mathas have historically and contemporarily played a significant role in societal development. These institutions have adapted to changing socio-political contexts, maintaining their spiritual core while expanding their influence.

**Keywords:** Ashrama, Hinduism, Ramakrishan Matha and mission, art of living, social service

### Introduction

The word '*ashram*' (*आश्रम*) derives from the Sanskrit root '*shram*' (*श्रम*), which means to toil or "to exert oneself" (Weckman; 2000; pp 94) <sup>[14]</sup> is used to represent spiritual hermitage, where one strives for a goal (usually religious) in a well-disciplined manner. Similar to *ashram*, is the institution of '*matha*' or monastery which means "cloister, institute or college" <sup>[1]</sup>. According to Hartmut Scharfe (2002) <sup>[9]</sup>, "*matha* denoted a 'hut, hovel' like the miserable hovel of the *svapdka* in Mahabharata or the hut of a nomadic *drya* in Baudhayana-dharma-sutra". Later it denoted the residence of various ascetics or religious scholars, sometimes attached to a temple (Scharfe, 2000, p. 172-73) <sup>[15]</sup>. The '*mathas/ashrams*' are mainly associated with those who pursue religious ideal and strive for religious cum spiritual goal and are exemplars of what Max Weber described as heroic religiosity, whom he called "virtuoso". In Weberian terms, monks from the part of that 'virtuoso' community, whose major concern is to achieve religious ideals, are major members of ashrams/mathas.

The existence of '*ashrama*' dates back to the Vedic period, while the mathas came into existence at the beginning of the Common Era, and mainly associated with the Advaita Vedantic tradition as expressed in the 'Sannyasa Upnahids' (Olivelle, 1992, p. 17-18) <sup>[7]</sup>. As compared to '*ashramas*' which caters to few students and generally with one to two *acharya/gurus*, *Mathas* are sophisticated with well-defined organizational structure with more teachers and numerous students (Larson, 1995, p. 99-100) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Historically, 'ashrams' were places of spiritual refuge, but also operated as center for religious studies as well as 'worldly' affairs. Any 'ashram' was organized around a central figure of a 'guru' or 'acharya', and operated like a school with a collection of pupils who were trained in arts of worldly affairs as well and were imparted with religious training. '*Ashrams*' and later on '*mathas*', were generally associated with local temple and survived on the endowments from the kings and/or local elites.

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### Guru in Hindu Tradition

The institution of 'ashrama' and/or 'mathas' have been an integral part of Hindu religious traditions since time immemorial. Associated with the institution of ashrama/matha, has been the institution of 'guru' or 'acharya', in fact the institution of 'guru' is more central to the institution of 'ashrama/matha', as 'Gurus can exist without matha/ashrama', but 'ashrama/matha' cannot exist without the central figure of 'Guru'. Institution of 'ashrama/matha' is organized around the central figure of 'guru'/acharya'. The reason for calling 'guru/acharya' as an institution is that, it has certain well-defined rules and regulations attached with it, which makes it trans-historical in nature which has continued down to contemporary times, with concrete changes but also with concrete continuities in accordance with changing socio-economic-political situations.

Hinduism unlike other major religious traditions lacks an institutional structure. There are multiple books, multiple traditions and many Gods and Goddesses, there is no founder and there is no specific religious authority. In such variegated religious traditions, which differ at multiple levels but also shares some important features, the role of 'Guru' or teacher becomes important in interpretation as well as transmission of religious knowledge. The 'Guru' occupies an important place in Hindu religious traditions, and has several roles associated with him; in fact, it operates like an institution with prescribed rules and regulations which manifest it through duties and responsibilities of a disciple towards the Guru.

According to David Smith (2003) <sup>[10]</sup> Guru is a figure of great importance in Hinduism (Smith, 2003, p. 167) <sup>[10]</sup>. The Guru as a religious teacher has played an important role in transmission and development of Hindu religious tradition which is characterized by immense diversity at social and religious level, and lack of any unified hierarchical organization. The Guru is an important figure who acts as a transmitter of religious knowledge and also becomes a locus for worship (Mlecko, 1982, p.34) <sup>[6]</sup>. David Smith in *Hinduism and Modernity* has explained Guru as 'venerable' or 'venerable teacher'. Traditional etymology explains the words as the one who removes (*ru*) ignorance (*gu*). The Guru is the one who dispels any kind of Ignorance (Smith, 2003, p. 170 <sup>[10]</sup>; Mlecko, 1982, p. 33) <sup>[6]</sup>. Guru has often been considered as God or God incarnate in the Hindu religious tradition. Different Hindu religious tradition has almost similar understanding of 'Guru', with minor differences.

In the Vedas, considered to be the oldest scriptures related with Hindu religious traditions, the word 'Guru' does not find mentions; however similar role was performed by *acharya*, who was a teacher. Since Vedas could only be transmitted orally, everyone could not have become an *acharya* and it was reserved for a class of Brahmins. In the Vedic Religion the Guru's role was as a teacher (*acharya*) of Vedas and other related subjects, he was supposed to be the source as well as inspirer of knowledge of the self, and as an enhancer of spiritual life. *Upanayana* or the initiation ceremony was must for the admittance of any pupil under *acharya* through which the pupil would take *diksha* and abide by all rules and regulations as prescribed by the *acharya*. The student was required to submit totally to the will of the teacher and was expected to follow whatever the teacher demanded. There was no such arrangement of fees,

but there was this concept of *gurudakshina* through which the *acharya* could demand from the pupil anything after the completion of his studies. In essence it was a one-man institution.

It is in the *Upanishads* where the word *Guru* finds mention and its necessity for spiritual realization is explicitly mentioned. The *guru* of the *Upanishads* also demanded total submission from the pupil, but unlike the Vedas, in *Upanishads* *Guru* is considered as God incarnate. The *Guru* of *Upanishads* is a spiritual teacher who would help his pupils to realize the ultimate truth i.e. *Brahman*, and *Guru* was must for gaining any true knowledge. The role of education in *Upanishads* is the attainment of sacred knowledge or knowledge of ultimate reality. The *Upanishads* repeatedly disapproved of study by oneself, considering it futile. Even self-study of scriptural works cannot give the supreme knowledge (Mlecko, 1982, p. 36) <sup>[6]</sup>. The role of the 'Guru' in Upanisadic tradition was to intellectually explain the scriptures in both word and spirit and to act like a guide for knowledge of spiritual path. It is in the Upanisadic tradition that divinity and 'Guru' is subtly related (Mlecko, 1982, p.36) <sup>[6]</sup>. The pupil was initiated through a *mantra* which would become effective only after *Guru* had uttered the words to his pupil.

The *Guru* also plays an important role in the Tantric tradition, where it was necessary to have the right *Guru* in order to go perform the tantric sadhna. The importance attached with *Guru* in Tantric tradition also follows from its 'secretive' character of the methods, where 'right' methods are only known to few. In the Tantric tradition the *Guru* is not bound by heredity and caste and is a liberated soul (*jivanmukta*). In the Tantric Tradition the *Guru* is also supposed to possess certain 'occult' powers. The divinity of 'Guru' or his identification with deity and importance for God realization, also echoes in different religious tradition ranging from Puranic to Epic to *Dharmashastra*. In the Bhakti tradition, the *guru* was being revered not because of academic knowledge or birth but because of his individual, inspirational qualities, rooted in his own personal devotion to and realization of the Lord (Mlecko, 1982, p. 46) <sup>[6]</sup>.

The *Guru*, if considered as an institution has been very important in the development of Hinduism over the year as the *Guru* had several roles to play, from being a teacher to one who was worshipped in Home as deity. The institution of *Guru* though does not exist in form of organization but in form of an intangible structure is quite flexible in nature. According to various Hindu traditions, there is *guru* for everyone and one just needs the 'right' *guru* in order to attain spiritual or God Realization. This inherent flexibility and contextuality provides a great amount of leverage to this intangible institution. Sociologically its can be said that '*Guru*' is an example of traditional authority in Weberian sense, whose Charisma is based on traditions and customs, were charisma beside everything else rests upon traditionally designated patterns and behaviors expected from the institution of 'guru', which in case of Hinduism are renunciation and possession of Knowledge.

### Guru/acharya and Mathas: Role in Indian society

As we already discussed above, the 'guru/acharya' or the "ascetic" or "holy man", is one of the oldest roles existing in the Hindu religious tradition and similarly one of the oldest existing Hindu religious organizations is that monastery (Wertz & Miller, 1996, p.1) <sup>[12]</sup> translated in vernacular as

'ashrama/matha'. The head of such 'mathas/ashramas' have been the bearers and propagators of cultural traditions that goes back to the Vedic times (Ibid.). In fact, the role of such "holy man" and their "ashrams" has been very central to the role development of Hindu religious traditions. The importance of "ashrams" and holy men can be gauged simply by looking into the role they have played in nurturing the personalities of great Hindu religious Hero's like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna as represented on great Hindu Epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Lord Rama was trained by great guru and one of the Saptarishis, Guru Vasishtha in his 'ashram', while sage Vishwamitra asked Lord Rama to protect his 'ashram' while he was performing *yajna* from two demons while imparting him knowledge. Similarly, Lord Krishna received his initial training in the *ashram* of sage *Sandipani*, while the heroes of the Mahabharata, the *Pandavas* and their brothers the *Kauravas* received training in both religious as well as worldly affairs from the great teacher guru *Dronacharya*.

Both 'ashramas' and 'mathas' have a long history of engaging with the wider society and shaping it. As we discussed above, both 'ashrams & mathas' along with the religious teachers associated with it have been an important source for dissemination of religious knowledge and morality in society. However, their involvement with the wider society in not only limited to religion, as commonly understood, but also with other sectors like Education and Health and general societal concerns. According to Hartmut, the *mathas* and attached temples were quite active holding competition among students, recitals of Vedic *mantras* and its learning as well as hosting debates and were "part of community festivals in the history of South Asia" (Hartmut, 2002, p.179-80) [9]. Different *mathas* associated with different religious traditions like Vaishnavism and Advaita Vedanta, Davita Vedanta and other debated and discussed philosophy which eventually contributed to the pluralistic nature of Hinduism. Olivelle also notes that *mathas* were centers where new religious texts were composed, and also served as libraries for ancient and medieval texts. One of the greatest teacher and sage in Hinduism, Adi Shankaracharya established four *mathas* in different corner of India and ascribed to each the care of one Veda each. Apart from being concerned with the preservation and dissemination of religious knowledge, some of the Hindu *mathas* also offered hospice care for pilgrims and various forms of assistance to their local communities (Hartmut, 2002) [9].

In fact, provision for health was quite a norm rather than exception in the Hindu *mathas*. According to Kenneth G. Zysk (1998) [13] Hindu *mathas* and temples had by the 10<sup>th</sup> century attached "medical care along with their religious and educational roles" (Zysk, 1998, p. 45-46) [13]. The evidence for this claim was found in several inscriptions in the contemporary states of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar as well as other places. An inscription in Andhra Pradesh dated to about 1262 CE mentions the "provision of a *viprasattra* (kitchen), an *arogyashala* (health house),  *vaidya* (physician), as well as a *prasutishala* (maternity house), attached with the religious center where people from all social background could be fed and cared for" (Ibid.). Similarly, another inscription dated to about 930 CE states the "provision of a physician to two *matha* to care for the sick and destitute" (Ibid.).

Thus, we can see that the role played by 'mathas' and 'ashrams' was not just limited to religious training but also expanded to taking care of other societal concerns like

Health and Education. Any organization/institution which exists in any society cannot survive or will lose its relevance if it does not interact with the wider society, even however it might be an all-exclusive organization, moreover the concern for society formed an important part of the ideology of 'mathas and ashrams'.

In contemporary society, the role of such mathas and ashrams has only increased through they have gone several important transformations as result of its interaction with modern day institutions and values (Rao, 2002, p. 10) [8]. Vasudeva Rao (2002) [8], in his '*Living Traditions in Contemporary times: the madhava matha in udupi*' has mentioned about how the "life in Udupi matha juxtaposes in itself a series of heterogeneous moments, some stepped in tradition, other an expression of modern times and means" (Ibid.).

David D Miller and Dorothy C. Wertz in *Hindu Monastic Life: The Monks and Monasteries of Bhubaneswar* has studied a number of such mathas which exists in the city of Bhubaneswar and its outskirts and their role in society at large. All the mathas in the city were established around the sacredness of one Guru or spiritual leader and were engaged in traditions religious activities. Though they make a point that the "social functions of monastic establishments are less readily apparent than are religious functions" (Wertz & Miller, 1996, p. 175) [12] and according to them the monasteries of Bhubaneswar usually shied away from having a wider role in society but they did note some change about performance of social welfare activities during their study in late 1960's among the monasteries in Bhubaneswar. Several Monasteries served as a) Guest house to pilgrims and wandering ascetics (Ibid. 176), b) they operated charitable dispensaries (Ibid. 181) c) few of them also operated schools and colleges and d) few of them also had opened religious parks and established roadside shrines (Ibid. 186). Most of the monasteries were non-sectarian as far as caste and religion was concerned and was concerned with the social welfare of all.

As we have discussed the nature and role of 'mathas/ashrams' and of 'gurus' or spiritual leaders in ancient and medieval India and their understanding and place in Hindu religious traditions, we now proceed towards an analysis of two such 'mathas/ashrams' and associates spiritual leaders and their impact and role in development of contemporary Indian society. We will analyze Ramakrishna Mission and the Art of Living organization headed by spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. These two movements are both 'traditional' as well as 'modern' in sense of the term and have contributed to the development of society in India as well as West in a considerable manner.

### **Ramakrishna Matha and Mission**

Ramakrishna Matha & Mission were established at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century during British colonial rule. Today the Movement has 187 centers across the world with majority (147) in India. Ramakrishna Math & Mission emerged during a period when Indian society was undergoing massive change in the socio-economic-politico sphere under the colonial regime and was aimed at countering the critique and vilification of Hinduism by Christian missionaries as well providing a new and progressive roadmap for development of India as well as entire world by alleviation of human character and integrating them with their essential being.

The matha and mission was established by Swami Vivekananda, the great son of Mother India and most loved disciple of great 19<sup>th</sup> century saint Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. After the demise of his master Narendranath Dutta aka Swami Vivekananda travelled the Indian subcontinent as a '*Parivrajaka*' or wanderer ascetic and encountered the mass poverty and ignorance widespread among the masses. The regeneration of India, according to the Swami was only possible if the masses were pulled out from their ignorance and poverty. Swami Vivekananda thus formulated his most famous work '*The Practical Vedanta*', which later became the ideological basis for the establishment of the Ramakrishna Matha and Mission (Gupta, 2014, p. 126) <sup>[3]</sup>. A lot of scholars have described Vivekananda's practical Vedanta merely as response and inspired from the West, however, Gupta notes that "Vivekananda's particle Vedanta instead of being a mere imitation of west was an outcome evolutionary trends in the structure of Hinduism which had clear pre-modern trends exemplified Buddhism (which criticized Brahminical ritual constraints), devotional sects like Shavism and Vaishnavism (who aspired to establish direct god to man relationship) and Bhakti movement (which were anti-caste, non-ritual and has ethic of service and renunciation). Particle Vedanta attacked caste parochialism and ritual efficacy and enlarged the religiously relevant action" (Ibid. 125).

The Ramakrishna Matha and Mission today is an embodiment of the ideas of Swami Vivekananda and his guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, both charismatic leaders in Weberian sense of the term as they inspired whole generation of young men and women of this country to rise up and lead a frontal attack to western domination as well as give a sustainable alternative to the dominant model of the world which was characterized by '*tamas*'. Both these spiritual leaders have a wider impact on Indian and western society as their work and life influenced many European and American intellectuals like Max Muller, Roman Rolland, Nikola Tesla as well as common people.

The motto and Ideology of the Ramakrishna Matha and Mission as stated by the organization is:

Motto: "The motto of the twin organizations is 'Atmano Mokshartham Jagad Hitya Cha', 'For one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world'" <sup>[ii]</sup>.

Ideals: "Work as worship, potential divinity of the soul and harmony of religions are three of the noteworthy ideals on which these two organizations are based. It is this ideal of service to man as service to God that sustains the large number of hospitals, dispensaries, mobile medical units, schools, colleges, rural development centers and many other social service institutions run the twin organizations" <sup>[iii]</sup>.

The motto was formulated by Swami Vivekananda while the Ideals of the organization followed from his teachings, especially the '*Practical Vedanta*'. This belief in the divinity of soul and works towards one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world, has guided the order of monks and layman followers of the Ramakrishna Matha and Mission to undertake several tasks of social welfare.

Today the Mission apart from imparting religious knowledge and being a centre for striving of religious goals, has expanded itself into the wider society and is engaged in a lot of humanitarian work as well as providing social welfare to the needy masses. According to the website of the organization, "the Math and the Mission run 14 hospitals, 116 Dispensaries, 57 Mobile-Medical Units, 7 Nursing

Training Institutes" and some of its centers also provide maternity and child welfare services. The Matha and Mission organized regular medical camps and eye camps in rural areas and for needy people. Apart from that, the Mission is also involved in detection and treatment of Leprosy cases in several of its important centers like Belur and Lucknow among others. The Matha and Mission have established more than 1200 educational institutions all across India including a deemed university, colleges, schools, computer and polytechnic training centers as well as coaching centers and public libraries.

In a country as vast and diverse and big as India, the Matha and the Mission has also undertaken several roles of providing relief and rehabilitation to common masses in wake of natural or manmade disaster, thereby filling the gap left by the Indian state. The Matha and the Mission has undertaken such projects like construction of roads and bridges and houses as well as township which are considered as prerogative of State or the Private sector. By taking on these roles, the Matha and the Mission is also involved in 'trust building' between common masses and itself, which ultimately helps in promotion of a universal, forward looking and socially concerned religion. Apart from these, the website of the Matha and Mission also has undertaken several developmental activities in Rural and Tribal areas. The website reports

"The Math and the Mission provides various services for the development of rural areas, which includes distribution of seeds, sapling and fertilizers, installation of tube-wells and water filters, agricultural camps and demonstrations, includes digging of wells / ponds, Farmers' Fare (Kisan Mela), wasteland development, construction of check dams, soil testing, animal resource development, awareness programme on health and hygiene, providing renewable (solar) energy units, vocational courses on dairy, construction and repairing of schools and community halls, tailoring poultry, horticulture, welding, computer, handicraft, etc." <sup>[iv]</sup>

Apart from undertaking the above-mentioned activities of social welfare and development, the spiritual gurus associated with the Matha and Mission also undertake classes and programs among the young professionals in order to spread the message of Vedanta aimed at harmonizing the life of young professionals who are affected by modern work culture in a negative way by inculcating in them the idea of holistic development through religious/spiritual development.

### **Art of Living Foundation & Sri Ravi Shankar**

The Art of Living Foundation, founded in 1981 by Ravi Shankar is a volunteer-based humanitarian non-governmental organization. Having centers in more than 150 countries it is an accredited United Nations non-governmental organization. The Art of Living Foundation claims to possess the "keys" to a better living. It offers courses on meditation and yoga all over the world to share its knowledge with the common public irrespective of their race, religion and gender. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's yoga techniques and main messages as 'Life is sacred; celebrate life' attracts an ever-growing public, be it in India, in America, or anywhere else (Avdeef, 2004, p. 321) <sup>[1]</sup>.

The Art of Living is a guru-centric spiritual movements and their teachers are trained to reach out to people as missionaries teaching different techniques. The followers of

Sri Ravi Shankar frequently use the blessing Jai Guru i.e. 'I Salute Guru Dev'. The disciples use this blessing in all their discussions, and to replace the "hello", "goodbye" and "thank you" like expressions. (Ibid: 324)

The central aspect of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's teachings is a breathing technique, which is otherwise known as the Sudarshan Kriya. The Kriya triggers the mind and body to release stress. Although Ravi Shankar denies Art of Living being religious, the path of Bhakti he teaches, has the nature of a religious practice both in the traditional and modern understandings (ibid:326). Its underlying principles are compatible with Vedic philosophy (Melton, 2003, p.1004)<sup>[5]</sup>. Also, it can be surely said that their religious message and practice are universalistic in nature. The foundation takes up the Hindu concept of seva, the selfless service to the "Divine". The guru's message is very clear about this: "Serve in whatever possible manner you can." In The Art of Living, however, the concept of seva is integral to the practice of bhakti.<sup>v</sup> The Foundation operates as a charitable organization actively conducting "Art of Living" stress-relief courses, based on yoga, breathing, and meditation (Gautier, 2008)<sup>[2]</sup>. Along with an emphasis on the presence of Divine, and Spiritual realization the Foundation offers a variety of personal-development and trauma-relief programs around the world. The organization is involved in community service through its centres, and programs are taken by people of many traditions and religious backgrounds. It is active in the fields of education, health, conflict resolution, sustainable development<sup>vi</sup> and disaster relief<sup>[viii]</sup>.

Art of Living is actively engaged in various humanitarian social services worldwide. T is active in the areas of poverty alleviation, conflict resolution<sup>[viii]</sup> disaster and trauma relief,<sup>[ix]</sup> empowering women, campaigns against female foeticide<sup>x</sup>. It also started 'Project Vidarbha - 'Swavalamban programme' for farmers in 2007. Their aim was to train, encourage and support farmers in severe drought hit regions to roll back their lives. More than 1100 volunteers provided training in hygiene, zero-budget farming, organic farming, rainwater harvesting, construction of toilets, etc. The program received official backing as a result of its success and was initiated in other areas as well<sup>[xi]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The above discussion about the institution of *Matha/Ashrama* and *Guru* has given us a brief understanding of how they have played an important role in formation of development of Indian society in past and also continue to play an important role in shaping Indian society at large in contemporary times. Contrary to the popular belief in academia that *ashramas/mathas* were mainly center for religious knowledge and were cut off from Indian Society, we have seen that *mathas/ashramas* were never isolated units, like an island amidst sea. They were very much engaged with wider society and engaged in social welfare and activism. The *matha/ashramas* traditions which exists in contemporary times has undergone many changes due to change in socio-economic-political conditions, but they have maintained an important continuity with the past tradition. Spiritual leaders today have an important role to play as, being a charismatic figure in their own right and being perceived by a section of society, they have an important role in shaping and taking forwards Indian as well as Global society towards realizing true goals of Humanity

and harmonizing the lives of people as well as leading to a more sustainable model of development.

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<sup>i</sup> Monier Monier-Williams (1923). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. p. 730.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://belurmath.org/about-us/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://belurmath.org/about-us/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://belurmath.org/about-us/>

<sup>v</sup> Pascale Lepinasse, *De la dévotion à l'ordre moral mondialisé. Profils et offensive de trois mouvements indiens transnationaux. Etude sur la vitalité hindoue contemporaine*. Ph.D. Thesis in preparation, Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

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