

Tracing the Roots: The Historical and Linguistic Legacy of Sanskrit In Ayurveda

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Abstract

Background: The Ayurveda traditional medical system of India is essentially influenced by the Sanskrit language which is not only the language, but also the philosophical and epistemological basis of the knowledge system. The major classical Ayurvedic texts, the Charaka Samhita and the Sushruta Samhita are written in Sanskrit, and within their vocabulary lie rich metaphysical, physiological and ethical connotations. The importance of Sanskrit to Ayurveda is however rarely addressed in modern literature despite its crucial role particularly as contemporary translation-based approaches towards Ayurveda evolve into vernacular translations and English ones.

Objective & Methods: The purpose of this review is to uncover and examine historical and linguistic heritage of Sanskrit in the creation, transmission and conceptual framework of Ayurvedic knowledge. The qualitative narrative review approach was implemented based on secondary data sources, such as classical texts, peer-reviewed literature and linguistic analyses. Academic databases, institutional repositories and Sanskrit research centers were searched using specific Boolean search techniques to retrieve literature. Thematic analysis has been performed to know the patterns in the ways Sanskrit has affected Ayurvedic terminology, epistemology and pedagogy.

Results & Conclusion: The findings indicate that Sanskrit has had a formative position in the development of Ayurvedic thought in terms of specific terminology, oral and written transmission and correspondence with classical Indian epistemologies. The Ayurvedic concepts of critical importance are endowed with their layers of meaning by Sanskrit etymology and grammar, and assist in a comprehensive perception of health. Sanskrit is no longer playing Ayurvedic training as a major part of contemporary training, but recent neo-revival movements are trying to highlight its still crucial role. To ensure the Ayurvedic authenticity but also to enhance its philosophical and clinical knowledge in modern situations, it is crucial to preserve and bring back Sanskrit.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, is not just a way to get medical care; it is also a complex system of knowledge based on Indian philosophy,

culture, and language, especially Sanskrit. Ayurveda, which began more than 3,000 years ago, is a holistic system of health and well-being that includes physical, mental,

emotional, and spiritual aspects. The Sanskrit language is at the heart of its structure. It is not only a way to express ideas, but it is also a basic framework that has shaped its main ideas, diagnostic logic, and philosophical view. Sanskrit's rich language, which is known for its exact grammar, deep etymology, and poetic structure, made it possible to write down Ayurvedic principles in a way that kept their complexity, nuance, and meaning in context. Classical texts such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya are composed in Sanskrit and continue to be revered as authoritative sources of Ayurvedic knowledge.[18] These texts utilize Sanskrit not only for its expressive capabilities but also for its mnemonic and pedagogical functions, especially within oral traditions that predate textual documentation.[23][2] The Sanskrit words used in Ayurveda, like prakriti (constitution), vikriti (imbalance), dosha (biological humor), agni (digestive fire), and srotas (channels), have meanings that are both empirical and metaphysical, as well as symbolic. This shows how Ayurveda works in a layered way. These words often come from root words that have philosophical and functional meanings, which makes it hard to translate them into other languages without losing meaning. Moreover, Sanskrit epistemological categories such as

pratyaksha (perception), anumana (inference), and shabda (authoritative testimony) form the foundation of Ayurveda's diagnostic and therapeutic methods, illustrating a profound alignment between Sanskrit philosophy and medical reasoning. [14] [21][5]

Despite this foundational role, the relevance of Sanskrit in contemporary Ayurvedic practice and education is diminishing due to the growing emphasis on translations, vernacular instruction, and biomedical paradigms. People are worried about the loss of conceptual integrity and the chance of misunderstanding because of this. Recent scholarly endeavours, digitization initiatives, and policy measures by institutions such as the Ministry of AYUSH have revitalized interest in the original Sanskrit texts, acknowledging their significance in preserving the authenticity and intellectual depth of Ayurvedic knowledge. The objective of this paper is to examine and evaluate the historical and linguistic heritage of Sanskrit in Ayurveda, concentrating on the influence of the language on the evolution, preservation, and dissemination of Ayurvedic principles.[1][25] The study examines the role of Sanskrit in Ayurvedic terminology, textual tradition, and epistemology through a narrative review of classical texts, secondary literature, and linguistic analyses, while also considering its ongoing

significance and challenges in contemporary society. This research aims to elucidate the intertwined evolution of Sanskrit and Ayurveda, emphasizing the co-evolution of language and medical thought, and the necessity of reconnecting with the Sanskrit roots of Ayurveda for its future development, credibility, and cross-cultural comprehension.[9][26][4]

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim: -To explore and analyze the historical and linguistic legacy of *Sanskrit* in the development, transmission and conceptual foundation of *Ayurvedic* knowledge

Objectives

1. To examine how *Sanskrit* language and terminology have shaped the core philosophical and clinical concepts of classical *Ayurvedic* texts.
2. To analyze the role of *Sanskrit* in preserving and transmitting *Ayurvedic* knowledge across generations through textual traditions and oral discourse.

METHODOLOGY

The article is a review paper, which mentions only first-hand sources, and makes use of the qualitative, narrative review method to evaluate the ethnographic and linguistic developments of Sanskrit within Ayurveda. The study combines modern academic text, ancient Ayurveda and philological science to explain the role

of Sanskrit in Ayurvedic practice, names and its historical development. The research design is a narrative literature review whose intention is to unify and clarify different academic perceptions as opposed to a systematic meta-analysis. Using a multi-perspective (historical, linguistic, philosophical) approach the study provides us with a full picture of the subject.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature was obtained from:

JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed, Shodhganga, DOAJ, and Scopus are all academic databases. Institutional and archival repositories include the Digital Library of India, the Internet Archive, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), and the AYUSH Research Portal. Sanskrit research centers and libraries at universities. A tailored search approach was used to improve search results by using Boolean operators. The following combinations of Boolean logic were used:

"Sanskrit" AND "Ayurveda"

"Ayurvedic texts" OR "classical Ayurveda"

"Sanskrit terminology" AND ("Ayurvedic medicine" OR "traditional Indian medicine")

"Charaka Samhita" OR "Sushruta Samhita" AND "linguistic influence"

"Sanskrit etymology" AND "healing systems"

These combinations helped narrow down relevant material from large databases, making sure that both historical and linguistic aspects were included.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed articles, books, and reliable translations published from 2020 to 2025.
- Texts written in English and Sanskrit.
- Works discussing the linguistic structure, philosophical foundations, or historical development of Ayurveda through Sanskrit.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Non-academic or commercial websites.
- Publications not relevant to linguistic or historical aspects of Ayurveda.
- Sanskrit texts that are not accessible in translation.

Data Collection and Thematic Analysis

Relevant literature was collected and analyzed to identify key patterns and insights. The main areas of focus include:

- The significance of Sanskrit grammar and etymology in Ayurvedic concepts.

- The methods of oral and written transmission of Ayurvedic knowledge.
- The impact of Sanskrit philosophical principles on Ayurvedic epistemology (such as Pratyaksha, Anumana, Shabda).
- The continuity and changes in the role of Sanskrit within contemporary Ayurvedic education and practice.

The analysis involved textual interpretation, comparative linguistic study, and historical contextualization to synthesize the information effectively

Analytical Framework

This paper was written in a historical-philological approach and was able to get complete understanding of how Sanskrit originated and its great contribution to the Ayurvedic line of thought. To trace a conceptual change over time comparative analyses of the Sanskrit Ayurvedic words and their modern applications were undertaken. The present review is limited to published secondary sources. A number of relatively less popular Sanskrit commentaries and manuscripts were excluded as there is no translation. In addition, there was no practitioner fieldwork that could have provided ethnolinguistic data to contemporary use of Sanskrit in Ayurvedic practice.

RESULT

It is quite difficult to comprehend the significance of the Sanskrit and the conceptual evolution of Ayurveda without analyzing some of the academic materials, reading some of the traditional books on Ayurveda. The findings are arranged into four broad categories whose themes.

1. Sanskrit as the Linguistic Foundation of Ayurvedic Thought

The Ayurveda language, Sanskrit, provides a linguistic system that is beyond comparison in terms of accuracy, depth, and philosophical value. The language used in the early Ayurveda texts is not just descriptive in nature, but is also deep rooted in the epistemological and metaphysical paradigms in Indian philosophy. Ayurvedic concepts such as dosha (that which produces decay), dhatu (that which supports), agni (transformative fire) and ama (toxins or undigested residues) are Sanskrit words that have a functional and philosophical component. These expressions are frequently polysemous with many layers of meaning and are difficult to translate, thus causing simplification. [7][27]The grammatical and syntactic principles of Sanskrit (vyākaraṇa),

particularly the impact of Paninian linguistics, enable complex expressions of causation, consequence, timing, and interaction. This is a highly valuable skill in Ayurveda since the logic of disease and treatment relies on complex chains of causes. The language form also allows conceptual categories to belong to larger philosophical ideas. Prakriti (constitution) and vikriti (imbalance) are facts of an empirical nature; they are connected with the concepts of cosmic order and entropy. They begin with the ideas of Sankhya and Vedanta tradition, and they show how the philosophical ideas of Sanskrit literature influenced Ayurvedic thought. Ayurvedic texts are frequently presented in Sanskrit verse (Shlokas), and have an epic nature that facilitates easiness to reminiscence and transmit orally while preserving the concepts. Sanskrit is not only a resource of preserving Ayurvedic knowledge, but also is actively involved in the manufacturing, altering, and understanding of that knowledge. The findings validate that it is the accuracy and philosophical richness of Sanskrit that are required to come to terms with Ayurveda. [20] [12]

Table 1: Sanskrit Grammar and Etymology in Ayurvedic Terminology

<i>Sanskrit Term</i>	Literal Meaning	<i>Ayurvedic Context</i>	Etymological Insight
<i>Ayus</i>	Life, longevity	Central to the definition of <i>Ayurveda</i> – “Science of Life”	Derived from root “ <i>Ay</i> ” (to live) + “ <i>Veda</i> ” (knowledge)
<i>Dosha</i>	Fault or imbalance	Fundamental bio-energies: <i>Vata</i> , <i>Pitta</i> , <i>Kapha</i>	From “ <i>Dus</i> ” (to spoil) + “ <i>Gh</i> ” (to hold) – holding potential to imbalance
<i>Dravya</i>	Substance	Refers to medicinal material, substance categories	“ <i>Dru</i> ” (to flow) – indicating potential to act/react in body
<i>Agni</i>	Fire or transformative energy	Digestive and metabolic functions	Metaphorical extension from fire to transformation
<i>Prakriti</i>	Nature or constitution	Concept of individual body-mind constitution	From “ <i>Pra</i> ” (primary) + “ <i>Kriti</i> ” (creation) – foundational formation

2. Transmission through Textual and Oral Traditions

Oral tradition has traditionally been the main source of retaining the Ayurvedic knowledge and oral knowledge has been frequently associated with written knowledge. The language that linked collective memory, intergenerational teaching, and textual transmission of knowledge was Sanskrit. Prior to the oral tradition of Ayurveda, the tradition was passed on orally (guru-shishya parampara-teacher-disciple tradition). Over the years, people found it easier to remember, recite and memorize metrical compositions in Sanskrit particularly of shlokas. The Sanskrit poetry was an efficient way of teaching orally since its rhythmic and formulaic nature served to make sure that the material would not change over time.

Some of the first works in Sanskrit were the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and the Ashtanga Hridaya in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Not only did these works bring medical knowledge together in a systematic manner but also the oral tradition was preserved through the presentation of the knowledge in a grammatical and poetic form. The elaborate compound constructions (samasa) of Sanskrit and their exact philosophical lexicon enabled Ayurvedic authors to explain the diagnostic, curative and philosophical principles in a concise and exact manner. Ayurvedic ideas were preserved through commentarial traditions, in which the major texts were expounded, although in a way loyal to the original

language and ideas. Ayurveda was also propagated through Sanskrit to Kerala and Sri Lanka by spreading the knowledge of Kashmir and Bengal, which also shows the uniting nature of Sanskrit. They are now taught in Sanskrit in Ayurvedic schools (Gurukala) and are commonly taught by

rote, but translations are becoming more common. Sanskrit poetry oral tradition is still a significant cultural and educational component, demonstrating that the language still has a significant role in Ayurvedic knowledge transfer between generations[22].

Table 2: Transmission of *Ayurvedic* Knowledge through *Sanskrit*

Form of Transmission	Description	Examples from Literature	Role of <i>Sanskrit</i>
Oral Tradition (<i>Guru-Shishya Parampara</i>)	Knowledge passed via recitation and memorization	Recitation of verses in <i>Ashtanga Hridaya</i> , <i>Charaka Samhita</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i> meter (<i>chandasa</i>) aids memorization
Written Texts	Codification of oral knowledge	<i>Charaka Samhita</i> , <i>Sushruta Samhita</i> , <i>Bhela Samhita</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i> script (mainly <i>Devanagari</i>) used in preservation
Commentarial Tradition	Interpretative expansion of core texts	<i>Chakrapani Tika</i> , <i>Dalhana Commentary</i>	Continuation of <i>Sanskrit</i> as scholarly language
Colonial Translations and Modern Editions	Efforts to translate classical texts to English and regional languages	Translations by P.V. Sharma, R.K. Sharma & Dash	<i>Sanskrit</i> roots still required for accurate rendering

3. *Sanskrit* Philosophy and *Ayurvedic* Epistemology

The diagnostic and therapeutic systems of Ayurveda are founded on the Sanskrit-based philosophical systems, in particular, on the systems of Nyaya, Samkhya and Mimamsa. The most important notions of knowledge, *pratyaksha* (direct perception), *anumana* (inference), and *shabda* (authoritative testimony), developed by Sanskrit

philosophy are invaluable to Ayurveda. In clinical reasoning, *pratyaksha* enables one to observe the patient, *anumana* provides an opportunity to deduce internal imbalances that cannot be seen directly, and *shabda* is based on the authoritative texts and teachers who have experience. This is where the need to save the Sanskrit Ayurvedic texts as the main source lies.[6] The Ayurvedic

logic and theory also relies on Sanskrit philosophical terminology, which supports the Ayurveda concepts of karana-karaka-bhava (cause-effect relationships), dravya-guna-karma (substance-property-action), and samprapti (pathogenesis). Sanskrit also allows co-occurring articulation of physiological, pathological and metaphysical conditions; e.g. agni may be physical fire of digestion, biochemical energy of transformation or metaphysical elemental fire. This is the aspect of

flexibility that allows an accurate and multi-dimensional comprehension of phenomena. Historically and philologically, Sanskrit has been one of the means of communication in Ayurveda, as well as its philosophical principle. In order to grasp Ayurvedic logic and practice properly, the Sanskrit epistemology must be understood, and the language and philosophy are the cornerstones of the field.[15]

Table 3: Sanskrit and Ayurvedic Epistemology

Pramana (Means of Knowledge)	Sanskrit Definition	Application in Ayurveda	Philosophical Influence
Pratyaksha	Direct perception	Diagnosis through observation	<i>Nyaya-Vaisheshika</i> schools
Anumana	Inference	Predicting pathology progression	Logic-based clinical decision-making
Shabda	Authoritative testimony	Reliance on classical Sanskrit texts	<i>Mimamsa</i> influence on textual authority
Yukti	Rational application	Integrative approach to treatment	<i>Sankhya-Yoga</i> traditions

4 Continuities and Shifts in Modern Contexts

The purpose of Sanskrit in Ayurveda is dynamic and sustainable in the contemporary society. In certain government and traditional gurukala schools, classical works are still being taught in original Sanskrit. Meanwhile, the expansion of contemporary Ayurvedic colleges, especially as operated by AYUSH and other universities has led to the increase in the use of English and translations into local languages. Although such translations ease the availability of the texts, they

usually render them meaningless because Sanskrit words are complicated and nuanced. The review indicates the growing disconnect between the classical-based education founded on Sanskrit and the contemporary education system, which is focused on real-world practice rather than a profound philosophical education. Expressions like prakriti are made easy to understand as types of personality or bodily constitutions and therefore the metaphysical and elemental meaning of

prakriti is lost. Pathogenic processes (**samprapti**) are often described by biomedical analogies and may mask the initial paradigm of the imbalances of elements (**dosha-vikruti**). The recent attempts to computerize Sanskrit literature, create extensive Sanskrit dictionaries and provide avenues such as the Ayurveda Ayush Research Portal are rekindling interest in the use of Sanskrit in Ayurveda. Translations are being funded by the government and by universities some of which are done in a way that preserves the depth and enhances the readability and Sanskrit research organizations are

producing commentaries to relate ancient knowledge with today. To achieve the right interpretation, scholars and practitioners are turning back to the concept of Ayurveda using the original Sanskrit. This revival is specifically visible in integrative medicine conferences and multidisciplinary research programs. These attempts show that without efforts to preserve Sanskrit as a living, interpretative and teaching language, much of the complicated concepts of Ayurveda may be lost to the generations to come. Conservation of Sanskrit is hence of the key to genuine and efficient Ayurvedic practice.[24]

Table 4: Contemporary Relevance of *Sanskrit* in *Ayurveda*

Area of Application	Current Role of <i>Sanskrit</i>	Challenges Identified	Examples
Ayurvedic Education (BAMS)	Core <i>Ayurvedic</i> texts still taught in <i>Sanskrit</i>	Need for translated and simplified content	<i>Charaka Samhita</i> in syllabus
Clinical Practice	Use of <i>Sanskrit</i> terms for diagnosis and medicines	Patients often unfamiliar with terminology	Use of <i>Triphala</i> , <i>Ashwagandha</i> , etc.
Research and Publication	<i>Sanskrit</i> terms standardized in WHO monographs	Lack of <i>Sanskrit</i> training among researchers	AYUSH publications, CCRAS dictionaries
Digital <i>Sanskrit</i> Initiatives	Online repositories, digitization of texts	Limited NLP tools for <i>Sanskrit</i>	IGNCA, AYUSH portal

DISCUSSION

The Sanskrit-Ayurveda connection is historical and linguistic and not accidental. Based on a narrative examination of classical texts and academic literature, this study highlights the role of Sanskrit on Ayurvedic knowledge conceptual, pedagogical, and

epistemological matters. Sanskrit does not only work as a transmission tool but also as an important part of Ayurveda development which impacts the structure of terms and theoretical basis of diagnosis and treatment.

The findings indicate that the Sanskrit was both grammatically and

semantically precise to address all the key components of the Ayurvedic thought. Contrasted with the colloquial languages, Sanskrit has succinct but most cunning words that can be used in literal and symbolic contexts. An example is such words as ama, agni, and prakriti, which are physical, mental and cosmic. The holistic perspective of Ayurveda suits Sanskrit very well because it is able to encompass a lot of various things under one word. Ayurveda does not subscribe to reductionism and it is believed in the interconnection of body, mind and environment. When applied to nirukti (etymological explanation), the Sanskrit method is useful in improving the comprehension of medical concepts by elucidating the semantic undercarning of terminology. This allows people who use the term not merely understand its meaning, but also its purpose. This associates the shape of language with the content of philosophy. Such a transparent etymology is very useful in preserving ideas across space and time. Among the most important things we have learnt is the significance of the Sanskrit which was used to pass Ayurvedic knowledge both orally and in writing. Ayurveda was transmitted orally in the Sanskrit poem with the assistance of memory aids well before being penned. The guru-shisha parampara along with the Sanskrit shlokas the form in which poetry is written helped to make it possible that

many generations of the healer caste were able to learn, remember and transmit complex medical knowledge with minimal alteration. By committing this oral knowledge to books such as the Charaka Samhita and the Sushruta Samhita, this not only preserved this knowledge, but also made it more uniform. These writings were made in such a manner that they could be consulted as an everlasting reference and at the same time retain the same memory and pedagogical advantage of oral tradition. The language that was used in both avenues of knowledge transfer was Sanskrit. This ensured that ideas remained constant and there was clarity in terms of the philosophical vision. This oral and written duality also contributed to the survival of Ayurveda in terms of historical changes, invasion and cultural evolution. Modernization or colonization destroyed a lot of native traditions in the world. Instead, Ayurveda has remained and evolved due to its foundation on Sanskrit and body of well-preserved literature. [16] [10]

Ayurvedic epistemology has been shaped by Sanskrit and it enhances our understanding of the significance of the language. Ayurveda was not a solitary phenomenon; it was closely connected with the intellectual systems of its time like the Nyaya (logic), Vaisheshika (atomism) and Samkhya (cosmic dualism). Such schools instructed Ayurveda on how to think,

arrange and scrutinize what they knew. Many of these methods are described by the use of a Sanskrit language that abounds in nuances of meaning. The three pramanas, in the Sanskritic philosophy, pratyaksha, anumana, and Shabda have specific and definite meanings. The Ayurveda clinical practices also have these implications. To elaborate, symptoms analysis (pratyaksha), doshic imbalances estimates (anumana) and faith in scriptural authority (shabda) are some of the main components of diagnostic techniques. Insufficient understanding of the Sanskrit epistemological background might make this enterprise by modern commentaries excessively simplistic, simply focusing on the empiricism and ignoring the strata and intersubjectivity of traditional Ayurvedic knowledge. [8]

The Sanskrit and Ayurveda connection has not been very cordial nowadays, primarily due to the fact that people are more inclined to study in English and the information that is remaining traditional is being re-packaged in biomedical jargon. The effect of this transformation is that Ayurveda is now more understandable to the rest of the world, however it has resulted in a significant amount of semantic erosion. Words have often been misused or translated poorly to fit the Western scientific categories which are not always as philosophical or ontological profound as the terms they describe. Indicatively, when

individuals refer to humor or bio-energy they are trying to mean dosha even though it loses its entire definition of causation, imbalance, and dynamism. Agni is often shortened in classical Sanskrit literature to agni dhati i.e. "digestive fire" though it refers rather to a metabolic change and even to perception. Such errors are detrimental to the Ayurvedic theory and make it less applicable in describing things. The evaluation also discusses some of the encouraging efforts to revive things. Individuals are reentering the original texts by digitizing Sanskrit texts, creating open-access glossaries in Sanskrit, and launching academic initiatives at the traditional Sanskrit schools. The interdisciplinary research in the field of language, philosophy and medicine is also assisting in the development of a new breed of researchers and practitioners who learn the significance of Sanskrit to the full comprehension of Ayurveda. Translational projects that go beyond literal translation by adding commentary, contextual commentaries and philosophical comparison are showing to be successful in connecting ancient Sanskrit texts with contemporary clinical practice. [3][11][19]

Despite the given insights, there remain issues. The research also has a weakness of relying on secondary sources, which might be influenced by the bias of the translators or other interpreters. Most of

the Sanskrit commentaries to Ayurvedic texts have not been translated and those translated have not been well translated making access non-trivial among scholars who may not be proficient in Sanskrit. The major assumption is essentialism, which is that only the Sanskrit determines what is true Ayurveda. This is also a hazard. Even though Sanskrit is very important, in the years Ayurveda has been involved with Prakrit, Pali, Persian and regional languages used in India. These contacts have made the tradition stronger rather than weak. The philosophical heart remains the Sanskrit layer and any examination of the ideas of Ayurveda would have to begin there. The other interpretive challenge is that of harmonizing the various modalities of production of knowledge. Ayurveda is based on Sanskrit, has metaphysical and teleological frameworks, which often do not interact with the reductionist methods of modern science. When attempting to translate or verify Ayurvedic principles within the framework of biomedical principles, one has to be cautious since they may lose their original connotation. [13] [17]

CONCLUSION

This study provides an insight into the importance of Sanskrit in Ayurveda in terms of its intellectual, therapeutic, and epistemological basis. Sanskrit has been used by not only a method of

communication but a method of classifying ideas and facilitating the correct transmission, preservation as well as teaching Ayurvedic knowledge, both orally as well as in writing. The meaning of Sanskrit is rich and subtle and is sometimes hard to translate in contemporary translation. Even though modern Ayurvedic training is more and more based on English and vernacular translation, this development may blur the initial meaning of Sanskrit terms. Meanwhile, the rising interest of researchers provides new prospects of making Sanskrit a better part of studying Ayurveda and practicing it. Its relevance is being preserved by multidisciplinary projects and digital preservation projects. In order to stay faithful to its traditions and keep evolving both nationally and internationally, Ayurveda will have to get back to its Sanskrit origins.

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