

Face to Face

Myriad-minded Abdul Mannan Syed

Abdul Mannan Syed is a brilliant and unique melange of scholar, critic, poet and novelist. Over 100 books to his name, Mannan Syed has set a new standard in our culture of literary criticism. His poems have an air of mysticism about them: one enters into a world of surrealism as one reads them. History, reality and superreality strike a new symbiosis in his novels to leave one to appreciate the intricate craft of a master story-teller. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Q: Who did it all begin, I mean your writing?

A: I was born in an environment where everyone was an avid reader. I had seen my parents glued to books and brothers and sisters finding reading as the best form of entertainment available. So, the habit of reading, if you will, was in my system. Moreover I was a loner from my very childhood and had difficulties to socialise with people. In introspection, I now feel that my inability to express myself had only led me to vent my unexpressed ideas on paper. Writing did work in me as a cathartic act.

Q: Tell us about your first published work?

A: Writing was a pure enjoyment for me. From poetry to novella, I loved to flirt with genres. My first work which appeared in print was a short story. It was published in Dhaka College magazine. The story happened to win a prize in a competition organised by women's hall now Rokeya Hall. I remember very well the prize-giving ceremony at Carzon Hall. Just think of it, a college going boy who has never even been among girls before is being awarded at a programme brining with women and girls.

Q: Your heart was in writing I suppose during that time. But did it annoy your parents?

A: Yes, very much. My father particularly was annoyed and worried about my studies. He was convinced that the ghost of writing would eventually spoil his son. Naturally I had to put a break to my writing only to return to it with more energy and passion. Having completed MA in 1965 I had the licence and freedom to devoted myself to writing.

Q: It was during the same time one of the most influential journal of Bangladeshi literature Kanthaswar (Abdullah Abu Syed edited) came out.

A: Not one but two literary journals played a pivotal role in providing a platform to the

birth of new writing. In fact the literature of the sixties has grown, matured with those journals. Immediately after Kanthaswar took the literary scene by surprise. I became one of its major contributors. At the same time I also started contributing for Samakal (edited by Sikander Abu Zafar). Getting a write-up printed in Samakal in those days meant you got your recognition as a writer. Unfortunately we do not have a literary journal of Samakal's stature now which can set a standard or inspire a generation of writers. In 1965-66 Samakal brought out its poetry issue of the new writings. That very issue literally brought me to limelight as a poet. But our journey to recognition was not at all smooth as it might appear to our readers now. We were in fact initially rejected by our predecessors, frowned upon and had received demoralising criticism of our work. Later on we managed to win respect and recognition, but not at the cost of what we were aiming to achieve in literature, which means the generation of the sixties were accepted as what they were.

Q: Who did you tackle your predecessors in our writing? What I mean to say is how did you begin to identify your own voice? Finding one's own voice in the world of creativity is the most profound task for a young writer.

A: We, the generation of the 60s, had from the very beginning of our literary career no confusion whatsoever about what should be our identity. I still personally believe one should have in mind he is a writer of Bangali literature and not only Bangladeshi literature. Well, being a Bangladeshi one should perceive things through one's own geographical spectacles, but that must not be through severing one's literary lineage that goes back at least a thousand years.

If you don't understand your

earlier generation, don't have any respect for their efforts you would not be able to constitute your own diction. A new style springs from the earlier style which is why history of literature is said to have a history of succession.

We began to identify who were our important poets, prose and fiction writers at a very early stage of our literary career in order to shun their path and discover our very own way of expression.

I can very well remember that we spotted Hasan Hafizur Rahman's prose as something special, the work of fictions by Syed Atikullah representing the fast changing time and as poets we could recognize Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmood and Shahid Kadri capturing the essence of a new and emerging sensibility.

Q: So Samakal and Kanthaswar together provided you the launching pad.

A: There was another magazine Swakhar (edited by Rafiq Azad) which did a great service to poetry of the sixties. It was in fact Rafiq Azad who brought the poets of the decade together in Swakhar. The publication of the poetry magazine made a sharp departure from the poetry of the earlier decade and it did make many of our senior poets sit up and take note. They did hurl volleys of criticism which in turn only confirmed that our voice is not theirs, it is new.

But one should not forget that Shamsur Rahman, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Sikander Abu Zafar and others played a historical role by lifting Bangladeshi literature from the provincialism and narrow-mindedness of Pakistanism. The generation of sixties picked up from where the progressive writers left. Any history of literature is like a relay race where each performs his/her part. We basically steeped into modernism's shoe of Shamsur Rahman and Hasan Hafizur Rahman's.

Q: We know that Baudelaire's translation into Bangla by Buddhadev Bose created quite a stir in the fifties. Was any particular book or a movement in the west influenced your generation?

A: Baudelaire's translation was as popular with us as it was with our senior poets plus we were getting information about the Beats. The world in the sixties was not as global compared to now. We hardly had a chance to have a look at a volume by some contemporary writers. During the same time our next door neighbour Calcutta experiencing a literary movement by the "Hungry Generation" pioneered by Sakti and Malay. Sakti Particularly had an influence on us. But whatever were our steps, we negotiated it with logic and were always conscious of our identity.

Q: We have seen in the history of Bengali literature that progressive writers rallying behind a journal to form a literary and intellectual movement. We can readily refer to journals like Kabita (edited by Buddhadev Bose) and Parichaya (edited by Sudhindranath Dutt) in the thirties or Kirtibas (edited by Sunil Gangopadhyaya) in the forties. About the journals of the sixties, we have already talked. It's a pity that we don't have a quality journal now to bring about changes in present drought in creativity.

A: This is a serious crisis. Creativity cannot flourish without a proper platform and literary journals provide that atmosphere. In comparison to the bevy of serious journals that are coming out in Calcutta, we are trapped in a quagmire. It is already high time for us to do some soul-searching what went wrong. Mpreover literary practices are now broad-sheet newspaper based which is an indication enough that writing is no longer a serious proposition. You don't preserve daily paper. Do you? This is one reason why you cannot

identify writers and trends after 60s. Literary magazines are not only few and far between, the attitude towards writing has dramatically changed since eighties. When we were in our prime youth we engrossed ourselves in our own writing. I see the younger generation now busy in criticising their predecessors or only interested in translating works from other languages and literature. Which is fine, but I feel that the primary concern of a young writer should be to devote himself to bring out his creative self. This is what I reckon is missing in our literary practice. If you ask me why it is like that I must say I don't know, but then political and economic crisis must have a share in it.

Q: Where you not in crisis in the sixties?

A: Publishing magazines was not as expensive as it is now. We could manage to bring out one by making small donations. This is one problem. Another one is rather serious. Anyone who ever has money can get a book printed. What I mean to say is becoming a writer now only matter of time. Get your book printed whenever you feel like. You don't need to publish your work in journals and receive recognition which has been traditionally done through the ages in any history of literature. This I think is a bad omen, a spectre looming large in our creative milieu.

Q: What are the other stumbling-blocks to a healthy literary growth?

A: Whenever we get a chance to speak our mind we come down heavy on the younger generation, forgetting what we should be doing for them. I hold the senior writers equally responsible for this down trend. In our time we have seen that our seniors keeping track of what we are writing. There were no short of constructive criticism. And not only that they took us to publishers,

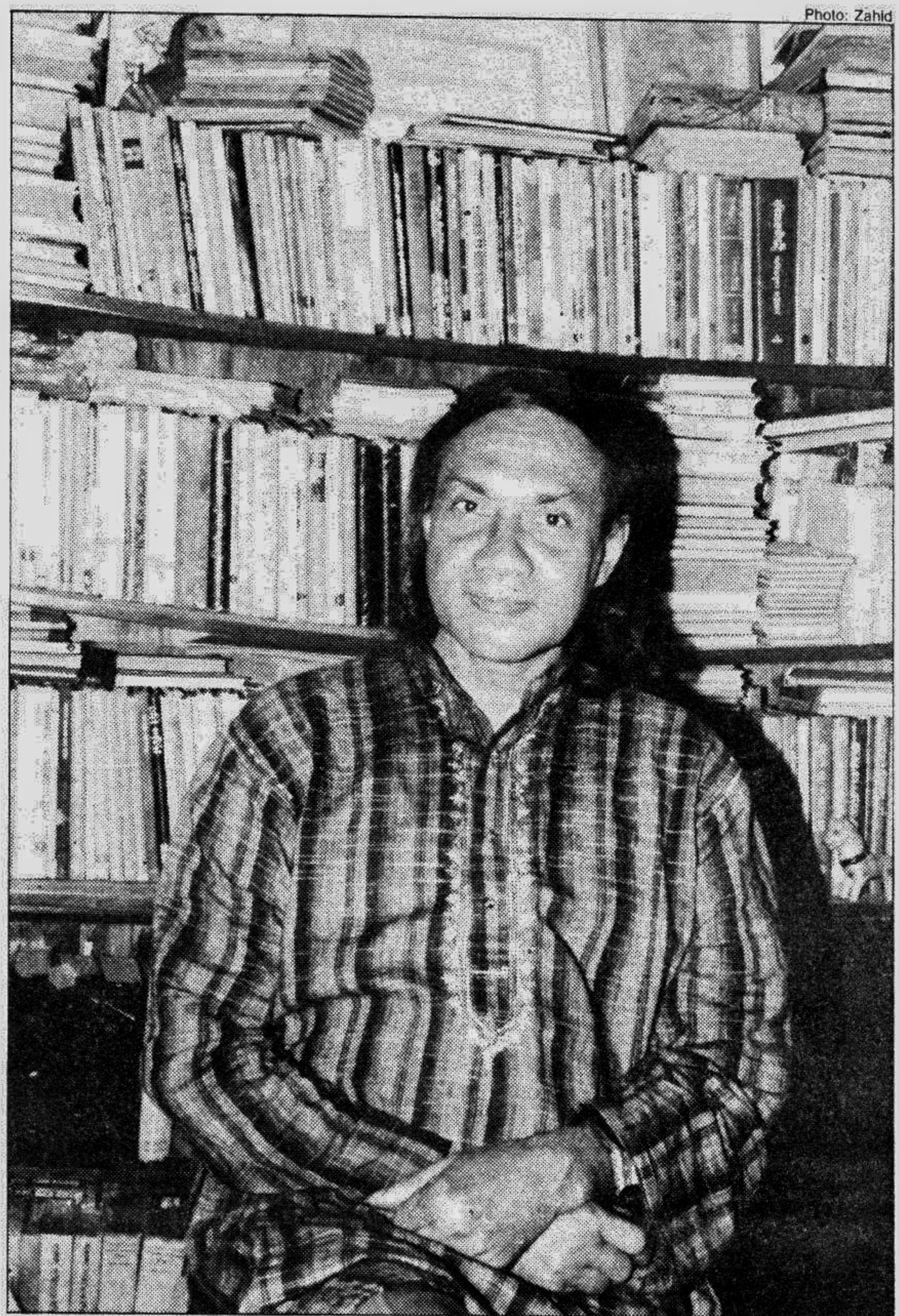


Photo: Zahid

introduced to radio and so forth. This is a healthy atmosphere with the ideal to grow and let others grow. Are we doing the same to our juniors, to the up-and-coming writers? The answer is a big NO. Rather we are busy about political gains, eager to create divisions and enthusiastic about winning political patronage.

Q: Were you not politically conscious in your time?

A: Yes, we were. But politics was not as dirty as it is now. We were not intolerant to ideas and type of writing that were different from our own. Think of the bad impact of

politicisation in literature. Now a minor or even a bad writer gets recognition and support from the political group he/she belongs. I believe this is high time to identify these ills of our literary culture and we must strive forward to embark on a clean up act. Or else dooms day lies ahead of us.

Q: You are ranked among our pre-eminent literary critics. Compared to other fields of creativity, criticism has not really flourish in Bangladesh. Why?

A: As a nation, I must say, we are intolerant to criticism. We are rather happy with dishonest and hypocritical

eulogies. I detest one particular tendency that is now prevalent in our literature which is of looking at Bangladeshi literature from a very narrow point of view forgetting the long heritage in Bengali literature. What I personally feel is if placed in the backdrop of our rich literary tradition we don't have a writer of the stature of Manik, Jibanananda Das, Tarasanker, Micheal. Since we have an independent nation we can declare one as an important or a major writer. But before doing that we should at least think twice, remember that we are carrying a tradition set by Tagore, Bankim and the likes.

When I was a Teenager

DR Razia Khan Amin, casually called "Raju" by friends and family, was a precocious teenager who finished Marx's Communist Manifesto as early as age 14 and played with dolls with equal eagerness.

Born in 1936, the youngest among three sisters, Razia Khan lost her mother when she was three. Although very religious, he had a very modern and scientific mind and never prevented his daughter from doing anything she wanted to do.

Then, was it Tamuzuddin Khan, her father, who was her greatest inspiration?

"No, never," replies Razia in a confident voice, adding, "I was an auto-directed, person who was self-taught. But my father's non-interfering, liberal out-look certainly had an impact on me to some extent."

English being the first language she was introduced to thanks to an English governess who taught her during her infancy, Razia's Bangla needed improvement. And soon she became an avid reader of all the Bengali literary works she could lay her hands on.

"My two sisters had been married off and had left behind many of the books they had received at their weddings," explains Khan.

So, at the very beginning of her teens, she began to read Manik Bandhopadhyaya, Sharatchandra, Rabindranath, translations of Tolstoy etc. "The time also coincided with the publishing of some great periodicals in Calcutta, like Darshanbani, Bharati, Bichitra etc. Her father collected these and she used to derive immense pleasure reading them. "In fact," says Khan, "the Bengali milieu was intellectually very lively and most youngsters of my age used to read the works rich in literary value."

Being motherless and her fa-

ther active in politics, the adolescent Razia filled her lonely world with books soon delving into writing fiction and poetry in Bengali.

Since her father also studied English Literature at the Presidency College she had the advantage of reading some of 'his' books too. Therefore, she started with the best books, which later influenced her own writing. At the outset of her writing career, which began at quite an early age, she tried to imitate Bibhutibhusan, Sharat Chandra and some Russian novelists. But later she developed her own style.

After the subcontinent was divided she went to Chittagong with one of her sisters and her family. There she joined another wonderful school Khastogir Girls' School. "The principal was a very dynamic person and a direct disciple of Tagore," informs Razia. But even there she couldn't continue very long, because before the partition her father left the Congress party and joined the Muslim League. He was elected a member of the Indian Constitution. So from

Delhi he went off to Pakistan as a deputy speaker of the Pakistan Assembly and started living in Karachi where Razia also went to school.

In the meantime in '52, when the Language Movement gained momentum as a participant in leftist politics, she was in constant touch with the people, who informed her about the latest developments at the noteworthy being inputs by Nadera Begum, sister of Munir Chowdhury. Her adventurous activities, escapade with the police and participation in the leftist and Language Movement reached Razia. She could no longer stay in Karachi and started pleading with her father that she be sent to Dhaka. Although her father was very reluctant as it would jeopardise her studies she could ill afford to stay quiet there, and made her way to Dhaka.

Trekking her childhood memory, what bothered her most, she says, was the class differences and the subsidiary, inferior position of the poor. This wounded her conscience and the thought of socialism dawned on her racing mind, perturbed with class discrimination.

IN CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR RAZIA KHAN

by Sonia Kristy

During her teens, her ideals and opinions were diametrically opposed to her father. He was a religious person, and a Muslim Leaguer, she was, at that time, an atheist and a die-hard believer in communism. Although she was not a bona fide member of the Communist Party, she used to attend their meetings and the underground Communist Party members in Dhaka used to take her help.

"I often had to deliver mails, sometimes I had to walk miles in the night alone, carrying Shahidullah Kaisar's letter to Laila Samad and back and forth. I was only 14 or 15 then. We all had code-names: Shahidullah Kaisar's name was "Kamal" and I was "Ruby". Did her father approve? "My father did not know everything but he could guess and was alarmed. But he was not the type of person who would interfere or prevent me from doing what I wanted to do. But one day I remember, he was standing near my table which was scattered with books by Karl Marx and some leftist writers, and I saw him looking at those in a very sad, pensive way. I felt sorry for him but I couldn't help it, because it was a matter of conviction."

Razia's second sister was also a leftist and most of the underground meetings she attended were held with her help in her house. Razia becomes profoundly

nostalgic, recalling her childhood memories. She remembers her dolls to which she was passionately attached and played with for hours. When they moved from Calcutta, the manager of the house didn't bother to bring her dolls with him and all the dolls were lost.



Once a rebel and a leftist in her teens, now 60-plus Razia is not very hopeful about the present generation. Compared to hers, she considers the generation of the day extremely unfortunate.

She was heart broken. Once a rebel and a leftist in her teens, now 60-plus Razia is not very hopeful about the present generation. Compared to hers, she considers the generation of the day extremely unfortunate. This generation, she says, has inherited a polluted world as a world that is physically and spiritually polluted.

"I feel very guilty that we've given them a world like this. They deserve much, much better."

They are a deprived generation struggling to make a life for them. But no matter how much they try individually, the odds are so burdensome that she cannot help feeling pessimistic. "I feel very guilty that we've given them a world like this. They deserve much, much better."

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