



RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘This has not been done because it was not made any one’s business to do it.’ Conserving Hyderabad city’s Hussain Sagar tank in the late nineteenth century

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Abstract

The ability to capture, store and distribute water safely is fundamental to the health of urban and rural settlements alike. This is true for Hyderabad city, located in India’s semi-arid Deccan region. I argue that an exegesis of the nineteenth-century conservation plans for Hyderabad’s large, built water reservoir, Hussain Sagar, reveal multiple hydrosocial processes at work: class structures related to proximity and use of the lake’s water; health concerns triggered by the water’s ebb and flow; and enforcement challenges related to issues of shared governance. This article shows how conservation of a scarce resource brought together princely and colonial officials (often parsed along historiographical lines) to address a shared concern within an urban context. Such urban environmental co-operation offers a new princely urban perspective on the binaries of princely–colonial and/or ruler–ruled.

Cities the world over exist in mutually constitutive relationships to water. Port cities look out to ocean frontiers, others harness the power of rivers that flow through them, while still others exist in relation to either natural or built waterbodies.¹ If none exists, planners and engineers often create waterbodies to address urban demands and return to them when their waters become fouled. Such is the case of Hyderabad India’s Hussain Sagar. Built in the sixteenth century, this ground level reservoir (called a tank) is the city’s defining aquatic landmark.² By the late

¹Some examples might include: Dal Lake and Srinagar in India’s Kashmir; Lake Geneva and Geneva city in Switzerland; Lake Como and Bellagio in Italy; Lakes Monona and Mendota and Madison in Wisconsin, USA; and the Salt Lake and Salt Lake City in Utah, USA. An overview of the relationship between port cities and oceans can usefully be found in M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (New York, 2003). Rivers and cities provide an entire sub-genre of urban and environmental history. Two examples among many are A. Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley, 2006); and C. Colopy, *Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis* (New York, 2012). See also a review of this genre in C. Basmajian, ‘The river in history’, *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (2018), 1265–70.

²In some contexts, it is referred to as a lake; in others, the term ‘tank’ is used; and in Telugu and Urdu – two major languages of Hyderabad city in the nineteenth century – it is sometimes called a *cheruvu*

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nineteenth century, the tank's waters began to be dangerously polluted. In 1890 and 1899, two committees, comprising members of the local princely Hyderabad government as well as members of the British colonial Residency staff, assembled to conserve the tank.

Attempts to conserve the tank reflect the possibilities and pitfalls of princely urbanism.³ This phenomenon can include precolonial urban development and planning of cities and towns, and the later dialogical relationship between South Asia's indigenous administrators of princely states and British colonial officials. In short, in the case-study that follows, princely urbanism means a system of diverse participants wielding diverse powers in the same urban space. This reinforces 'inequities, heterogeneities, and contestations that have existed around lake spaces for centuries'.⁴ On the one hand, the example of Hussain Sagar offers a stirring example of the latter form of princely urbanism comprised of Indo-British co-operation arising in an urban environment and focused on a shared and valued aquatic resource, not unlike what Preeti Chopra felicitously called the making of Bombay, a 'joint enterprise' between Indians and Britons alike.⁵ Yet on the other hand, efforts to conserve Hussain Sagar ultimately 'failed' from the diversity of people, places and enforcement regimes that could not be effectively co-ordinated. As Prashant Kidambi has demonstrated, 'failure' can mean an objective lack of success. But it also carries with it the possibility not only of degrees of failure, but also the unseen benefit of lessons learned and the opportunity to 'fail better' in the future, or not fail at all.⁶ In short, what happened at Hussain Sagar is a story of too many stakeholders laying claim to too many aspects of its waters.⁷ In cities like Delhi (and Hyderabad), William Beinart and Lotte Hughes note 'colonial growth was spliced onto pre-colonial roots'.⁸ In Hyderabad, the 'splice' – a diversity of Indo-British power brokers – was ultimately the weak point in efforts to conserve the tank. To help discern key areas where conserving Hussain Sagar 'failed' or fell short, I examine the tank and surrounding urban environment through its hydrosocial

meaning 'tank' or 'artificial lake' or sometimes called a *sagar* (Sanskrit) meaning 'ocean' or 'sea'. For consistency, I will use the term tank.

³A parallel case is seen in Bangalore. See A. Sen, H. Unnikrishnan and H. Nagendra, 'Restoration of urban water commons: navigating social-ecological fault lines and inequities', *Ecological Restoration*, 39 (2021), 120–9. For an overview of the ways in which urban history has been constructed, see S.M. Blumin, 'City limits. two decades of urban history in JUH', *Journal of Urban History*, 21 (1994), 7–30.

⁴Sen, Unnikrishnan and Nagendra, 'Restoration of urban water commons', 121.

⁵P. Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis, 2011).

⁶To 'fail better' is from the poet Samuel Beckett. The larger suggestion of this oft-cited passage suggests Beckett's own pessimism and sense of futility. In addition, scholars have used Michael Foucault's ideas regarding power and what it does *not* yield or fails to produce, or put another way, the upside of failure. In South Asia circles, examples of this notion of failure can be found for Bombay in P. Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis. Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920* (Aldershot, 2007), 73. See also for Delhi R. Kishore, 'Urban "failures": municipal governance, planning and power in colonial Delhi, 1863–1910', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 52 (2015), 439–61, see 440–1 and 452–9.

⁷Hyderabad officials and their British counterparts faced other jurisdictional challenges on a larger scale as Eric Beverley has shown for the frontier between Hyderabad state and the Bombay presidency. See E.L. Beverley, *Hyderabad, British India, and the World: Muslim Networks and Minor Sovereignty, c. 1850–1950* (Cambridge, 2015), ch. 6.

⁸W. Beinart and L. Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford, 2007), 149.

cycle. The hydrosocial cycle is a ‘socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time’.⁹ A hydrosocial approach looks beyond the technical aspects of waterworks and instead focuses on human–water interaction.

Princely urbanism as manifested in the conservation of Hussain Sagar illuminates categories of class, place and power.¹⁰ These analytical lenses focus our attention at the intersection of different individuals (colonial and princely), their locations (under colonial or princely control) and their (in)ability to make change vis-à-vis the tank. They wielded power from such means as policing the waterfront to deploying scientific analysis of the water’s contents. Conserving the tank reveals different classes of individuals in some relationship to the tank; it highlights physical places that the tank either threatened or embellished; and it shows how late nineteenth-century princely urbanism was unable to effectively develop power systems to enforce otherwise well-meaning plans to conserve the tank. The health of water resources is fundamental to urban survival, and understanding what has, and has not, worked in the past provides important lessons for the present and future. In what follows, I first provide some brief background of Hyderabad, and then turn to an exegesis of the 1890 and 1899 reports viewed through the lenses of class, place and power.

Orientations

Conserving Hussain Sagar intersected with the city and region’s environment as well as its political systems. Environmentally, Hyderabad city is in the heart of India’s Deccan plateau. This elevated semi-arid region of south-central India does not benefit from snow melt to feed its tanks and rivers. It depends entirely on monsoonal rains. As such, the ability to capture, control and store water for potable and agricultural use was key to the city’s success and survival. Hussain Sagar was central to this need. Politically, the capital, Hyderabad city, anchored

⁹J. Linton and J. Budds, ‘The hydrosocial cycle: defining and mobilizing a relational-dialectical approach to water’, *Geoforum* (2013), 170–80, at 170. See also J. Linton, ‘Modern water and its discontents: a history of hydrosocial renewal’, *WIREs Water*, 1 (2014), 111–20. The hydrosocial cycle is different from the better-known hydrological cycle, the latter first developed by the American geographer Robert Horton in 1931. R. Horton, ‘The field, scope, and status of the science of hydrology’, *Transactions, American Geophysical Union*, 12 (1931), 189–202, at 192. Pushing against a purely hydrological view are advocates of a hydrosocial perspective. Early ideas about this were environmentally deterministic: a water–shapes–people approach. These scholars included Karl Wittfogel who explored ideas of ‘hydraulic civilizations’ or ‘hydraulic empires’. K.A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957). For a reappraisal of the hydrosocial and Wittfogel’s role in this school of thought, see J.M. Banister, ‘Are you Wittfogel or against him? Geophilosophy, hydro-sociality, and the state’, *Geoforum*, 57 (2014), 205–14. Most recently, scholars such as Eric Swyngedouw have shown the ways in which, by following the movement of water, even greater interpenetrations between humans and water are visible. E. Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power* (Oxford, 2004), 2. Studies of South Asia and the Deccan have also come to employ a hydrosocial approach. See, for instance, D. Mosse, *The Rule of Water: Statecraft, Ecology and Collective Action in South India* (New Delhi, 2003); A. Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood* (New York, 1995).

¹⁰To the best of my knowledge, no scholar has previously explored the conservation of Hussain Sagar as it occurred in the 1890s.

Hyderabad state, also known as the Nizam's Dominions, India's largest and wealthiest princely state.¹¹ The state covered 214,186 square kilometres and the city held 448,466 inhabitants.¹² Enmeshed in the colonial world of the British Raj, at its apogee in the late nineteenth century, Hyderabad was home not only to a British Resident and the Residency staff, but also housed a large military cantonment based in the adjoining municipality of Secunderabad.¹³ For the ruling prince of Hyderabad (the Nizam) and the Resident as well as other British and Indian forces, Hussain Sagar served as the central and largest source of potable water.¹⁴

When the Nizam's government and Residency officials sat down together in 1890, Hussain Sagar had stood witness to 327 years of history. The tank had survived longer than any Deccan empire held sway, longer than the Mughal Empire's rule, and longer than India's colonial period. Yet, for its long life, no history of Hussain Sagar exists. A micro-scale examination of the tank and its urban social linkages is long overdue. What is known of the tank's origin is as follows. In 1563, the fourth Qutb Shahi ruler, Ibrahim, presided over his Deccan kingdom. Folklore suggests he brought to his court Khajah Hussain Shahwali, a descendant of a holy man, and considered valuable to have close at hand. The Qutb Shahi ruler asked Shahwali to construct a tank, which he did, taking 3 years, 7 months and 19 days at a cost of Rs. 254,636. The tank takes its name from Hussain and was known earlier as 'Hussain sahib cheruvu'.¹⁵ The tank today is about 5.7 square kilometres in size, perhaps 25 per cent smaller than its original footprint, and about 17 metres deep.¹⁶

Hyderabad state and the city were significant destinations for visitors to the Deccan. The city was known for its colourful and sometimes unruly inhabitants and the region was famous for its diamonds. Indeed, the hill-top fort of Golconda became synonymous with wealth, leading in the nineteenth century to several American towns taking its name.¹⁷ Visitors also commented on the city's ample water supply made possible by the Musi River as well as tanks that dotted

¹¹For an overview of the princely states, see B. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and Their States* (Cambridge, 2004). On Hyderabad's place in a colonial and wider world, see Beverley, *Hyderabad, British India, and the World*.

¹²M.M. Khan, *Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series Hyderabad State*, Reprint 1991 Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi ed. (Calcutta, 1909), 20.

¹³On the mechanics of the Residency system, see M.H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India* (Delhi, 1991).

¹⁴The relationship between urban history and environmental history is now well established. See C. Rosen and J. Tarr, 'The importance of an urban perspective in environmental history', *Journal of Urban History*, 20 (1994), 299–310. More recently, as examples of this shared historiographical tradition, see, for instance, C. Smith, *City Water, City Life* (Chicago, 2013); S. Amrith, *Unruly Waters* (New York, 2018).

¹⁵H. Fraser, *Our Faithful Ally the Nizam* (London, 1865), 494–5.

¹⁶On Hussain Sagar's place in Hyderabad's aquatic geography, see S.M. Alam, *Hyderabad–Secunderabad (Twin Cities): A Study in Urban Geography* (Bombay, 1965), 25–7. Unlike in other cities where colonial officials transplanted and implemented gravitational water schemes, Hussain Sagar and much of Hyderabad and the Deccan's waterworks predate European arrivals. On the ways in which such schemes were implemented elsewhere in India, see J. Broich, 'Engineering the empire: British water supply systems and colonial societies, 1850–1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 46 (2007), 346–65.

¹⁷For instance, Golconda Illinois and Golconda Nevada.

the urban landscape. Several Europeans who visited Golconda and Hyderabad in the seventeenth century passed favourable comments on Hyderabad's urban aquatic assets. On his way to Hyderabad in 1666–67, Monsieur de Thevenot spoke of the 'many lovely Reservatories' found in the adjacent countryside.¹⁸ Touring through Hyderabad city itself, the French monk Abbé Carré wrote that 'it is a very spacious town, situated in flat country, watered by a fine river'.¹⁹ And, wandering across India during the late Mughal period, François Bernier visited Hyderabad, noting that it had 'good wholesome water'.²⁰ Hyderabad city's waterbodies continued to attract comment well into the nineteenth century. For instance, Isabel Burton, wife of Sir Richard Burton, came to Hyderabad in February 1876 where she went for several boat rides on the city's tanks. She explains what these waterbodies meant to local inhabitants, 'these lakelets, with their cool, damp air and verdant borders, are always pleasant to the visitor of a thirsty land, subject to hot, dry winds, and much neglected by Jupiter Pluvius'.²¹

In the years before the reports on Hussain Sagar were issued, several changes took place that laid the foundation for this type of urban self-analysis. The first of these changes involved the growth of Hyderabad city.²² In 1798, the Nizam signed a Subsidiary Alliance with the East India Company, thus paving the way for British East India Company troops to be stationed at Hyderabad. These troops camped at what would become Secunderabad, north of the old city and adjoining Hussain Sagar. In 1806, across the Musi River from the old city, the British Residency was completed, leading to increased settlement north of the river and stretching towards Secunderabad. This urban growth put increased pressure on Hussain Sagar as it became sandwiched between Secunderabad to the north and the Residency, Musi and the old city to the south. A second phenomenon occurring in the years before the reports were issued had to do with bureaucracy. Hyderabad state had benefited from the tenure of its most famous prime minister, Salar Jung I, who – among many improvements – in 1882 reformed the administration to have 5 ministries with 44 departments under them.²³ This enlarged bureaucracy provided the institutional framework under which waterbodies such as Hussain Sagar could be evaluated. Finally, a third change in the decades before 1890 was the growth of scientific knowledge. Hyderabad's urban bureaucracy added British nationals to its ranks who brought with them their own know-how while joining Hyderabad's own local experts, and it aided in Hyderabad's integration into both greater India and the British empire. For instance, Patrick Hehir, having served in the Indian

¹⁸J. de Thévenot, *The Travels of Monsieur De Thevenot into the Levant in Three Parts, Viz. Into I. Turkey, II. Persia, III. The East-Indies / Newly Done out of French* (London, 1687), 94.

¹⁹Abbé Carré, *The Travels of Abbé Carré in India and the Near East, 1672 to 1674. Tr. from the Ms. Journal of His Travels in the India Office by Lady Fawcett and Ed. by Sir Charles Fawcett with the Assistance of Sir Richard Burn*, vol. II (London, 1947), 329.

²⁰F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656–1668*, 2nd edn (Delhi, 1968), 197.

²¹I. Burton, *Arabia Egypt India: A Narrative Travel* (London, 1879), 185. Jupiter Pluvius was an epithet for Jupiter meaning 'sender of rain'.

²²On the growth of the city, see Alam, *Hyderabad–Secunderabad (Twin Cities)*. Especially helpful are maps showing the growth of Hyderabad and Secunderabad with Hussain Sagar between the two. See ch. 1, pp. 1–11 as well as maps on pp. 4, 6, 9 and 11.

²³N. Luther, *Hyderabad: A Biography* (New Delhi, 2006), 152.

Medical Service, later worked as the chief medical officer to the Nizam's Army. Hehir had a special interest in water (publishing an entire book on the subject), and brought with him medical and scientific training when he helped co-author the reports of the 1890s.²⁴ By the late 1880s, a combination of urban growth, bureaucratic reforms and specialized knowledge laid the groundwork for attention to focus on the condition of the tank.

Class

The reports of 1890 and 1899 lay bare urban class and occupational structures linked to Hussain Sagar. Social relationships become evident and come into focus when we follow the flow of water across Hyderabad's social networks. Not only are relationships between humans and water evident, but also forms of socio-spatial segregation become clearer. One community highlighted in the reports and entirely dependent on the water of the tank (but who did not live near the tank) were the dhobis (washer folk).²⁵ To do their work, dhobis needed an ample supply of water to wash clothes (wetting, soaping and rinsing), and open sun-drenched spaces to dry them. The tank and its surroundings proved ideal for this but came with problems. Dirty linens debouched their contents into the water. With diseases like cholera prevalent in Hyderabad, faeces from soiled linens contaminated the tank along with the soap used to get them clean. Other smaller tanks that the dhobis used for washing connected to Hussain Sagar through a network of canals.²⁶ Thus, the dhobis' labour provided a constant stream of effluence into a network of tanks ending at Hussain Sagar.

The 1890 committee made a series of recommendations regarding the dhobis aimed at circumscribing their work and limiting the pollution that flowed into Hussain Sagar. The central enjoinder was that 'No dhobies should be allowed to ply their trade within this area or in the tank itself. No people should be allowed to wash their persons or their clothes in the tank or to commit any nuisance within the fence.'²⁷ Parts of the tank were fenced off, creating not only limited access to the tank itself, but dividing the shore areas into discrete class and economic zones. Yet an outright ban on this critical labour force from Hussain Sagar or some of its feeder tanks was not possible. They were an integral part of the urban workforce and the committee had to find a way to accommodate their needs rather than disband them. As such, the report demonstrates a degree of princely-colonial compassion and compromise extended toward the plight of the dhobis.

²⁴P. Hehir, *Hygiene of Water and Water Supplies* (Calcutta, 1890).

²⁵Dhobis, cattle owners, waterworkers, petty agriculturalists and others all suffered similar fates at other tanks increasingly brought under urban authority and colonial control. Bangalore's tanks provide a striking parallel. See Sen, Unnikrishnan and Nagendra, 'Restoration of urban water commons'; and A. Ramesh, 'Flows and fixes: water, disease and housing in Bangalore, 1860–1915', *Urban History*, FirstView (2021), 1–23, at 9–10.

²⁶The last tank before Hussain Sagar was Russellpura tank (near Bolarum), and the penultimate tank was Dhobi's Tank, close to Trimulgherry.

²⁷'Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, Telangana/Andhra Pradesh State Archive and Research Institute (henceforth T/APSA), 2.

As the prohibition to the dhobies using the tank will doubtless cause inconvenience to them as well as to the community in general, the Committee propose that extra lengths of dhobies' ghâts be forthwith constructed below the tank in places conveniently situated for a constant supply of water from the sluices, and that in the same locality bathing ghâts be established.²⁸

By 1899, this portion of the 1890 report had indeed been accomplished. Unlike other communities of 'urban poor', dhobis were essential in the urban environment and participants in the hydrosocial cycle: a dense population required dhobis to clean their clothes, who in turn required a stable supply of water to ply their trade.²⁹ While other groups fared worse in the committees' recommendations, the dhobis were spared large-scale disruption.

In addition to the dhobis, other working-class groups made use of Hussain Sagar's waters and shorelines. Palm trees grew along the water's edge. An entrepreneurial toddy tapper community required access to these trees to draw their precious liquid and sell it to thirsty consumers. Yet, toddy tapping took place between the fence and the water. A toddy tapper community was now working at the tank's edge, and customers came to them to buy (and drink) toddy. This foot traffic only added another source of contamination to the tank. The recommendation was clear: 'The toddy drawers must carry their pots to the fence. The planting of new toddy trees should not be permitted.'³⁰ In this recommendation, the committee managed to curtail customer traffic between the fence and the water, and at the same time ensure that eventually the toddy tappers themselves would relocate their trade to newer more productive palm groves.

In the interregnum between the 1890 and 1899 reports, the hydrosocial relationship between the tank, its shores, some non-human actors and the city becomes further evident. For instance, in 1898, a complaint came to the Nizam's government regarding a shepherd named Abdul Sattar. Sattar allowed his cattle to graze on grassland surrounding Hussain Sagar. In particular, he did this under moonlight. Whether his choice of evening was to avoid detection or was out of convenience is unknown, but it draws attention to the ways in which inhabitants related to water both day and night. Regardless, a complaint emerged that Sattar's cattle defecated on the grass adjacent to one of the steamboat launches where the Hyderabad government stored tents, boats and supplies. The superintendent of the Steam Launch Department complained to the private secretary of the prime minister regarding the nuisance. He wrote that the cattle at Hussain Sagar's edge, 'causes a great deal of nuisance to the stores, boats and as well as to the tents'.³¹ As Michael Anderson has noted, the language of 'nuisance' and 'public nuisance' was, at this very moment, taking up a large part of police energy across colonial

²⁸*Ibid.*, 13. Princely benevolence is not an uncommon theme in Hyderabad history. See, for instance, examples in M. Pernau, *The Passing of Patrimonialism* (New Delhi, 2000).

²⁹N. Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge, 2001).

³⁰Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 2.

³¹Superintendent Steam Launch Department to private secretary to H.E. the minister, 26 May 1898, Private Secretary's Office, miscellaneous, 24/2/163, T/APSA.

India.³² The Chaderghat Municipality, responsible for the particular area where Sattar's cattle practised their nighttime necessities, threatened him with legal action. This municipal committee held power to enact a series of by-laws regarding the waterbodies in their jurisdiction. The municipal committee 'may by public notice prohibit bathing or washing animals or clothes in any public space not so set apart, and other acts not so permitted, by which water in public places may be rendered foul or unfit for use'.³³ In this way, the Hyderabad committee participated in larger trends and discourses of 'public nuisance' that circulated well beyond the state. Men like Sattar ran afoul of such laws, 'the law of public nuisance could be used to exclude groups with customary entitlements to its use', and Sattar who trespassed on this and other regulations found new fields for his cattle.³⁴

If the urban working class are one community addressed by the conservation of Hussain Sagar, the reports equally shed light upon Hyderabad's urban elite. While the city's elites are better known than dhobis or toddy tappers, nonetheless the reports contribute to our understanding of their relationship to water and city life.³⁵ These elites intentionally resided along Hussain Sagar's cool wind-swept shores. The tank provided them with certain benefits – as noted by Burton during her visit – (cool breezes, scenic vistas, pleasure boating, etc.) and they in turn graced its borders with their presence, making (then as now) waterfront property often the abode of wealth. In suggesting that the government extend a fence completely around the tank, the authors of the report indicated its location by identifying specific individuals' homes. In other words, the early report mapped Hussain Sagar onto the social geography of Hyderabad and Secunderabad at the time.³⁶ For instance, the fence was to run, 'past the houses owned by Mr. Pendlebury and Sirdar Dilar Jung'.³⁷ In other words, localized construction (in the form of the fence) was highly personalized, relying on specific individuals' bungalows or palaces rather than latitudes or longitudes to identify where the fence would be built. Who were these men and why were they singled out?

Three separate groups of elites resided along the edge of Hussain Sagar. First, at this time Hyderabad's two most important individuals had palaces on the tank. The Nizam himself had recently constructed a 'new palace' in what was then a small

³²M. Anderson, 'Public nuisance and private purpose: policed environments in British India, 1860–1947', in *SOAS Law Department Working Papers* (London, 1992), 9.

³³*The Chaderghat Municipal Rules and Bye-Laws* (Hyderabad, 1896), 43.

³⁴Anderson, 'Public nuisance and private purpose', 17.

³⁵While the conservancy reports describe specific homes and individuals of Hyderabad's elite class, some of this information was available in other sources. See, for instance, the Munn maps, available at: <https://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/45288>. See also D. Hutton, 'Elite life in Hyderabad and Secunderabad', in D. Dewan and D. Hutton (eds.), *Raja Deen Dayal Artist-Photographer in 19th-Century India* (New Delhi, 2013).

³⁶Possibly also at work here was a type of real estate shift whereby through fencing the value of property along Hussain Sagar might go up, benefiting those who owned land around the tank. This certainly occurred elsewhere in colonial India, for instance at Calcutta along the Hooghly River. Bhattacharya refers to this as a form of 'manufacturing of a hydrological landscape'. See D. Bhattacharya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge, 2018), 76.

³⁷Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 1.

village called Saifabad (now a posh neighbourhood).³⁸ This palace on Hussain Sagar was a late addition to the roster of homes owned by the Nizams. Their earlier palaces were neither on the tank nor on the Musi River. Thus, the idea to have a home adjacent to the tank was more recent in the longer history of Hyderabad's urban elite residential geography.³⁹ And the prime minister of the state, Asman Jah, also owned a house on the waterfront. Asman Jah had some garden ground that fell within the area between the fence line and the water's edge. The committee of 1890 considered cultivation unacceptable in the zone between the fence and the water. The 1899 committee lamented that regarding Asman Jah's property, they held 'No adequate control over this, which is jagir land.'⁴⁰ *Jagir* land was one of five distinct types of landholding that ringed the tank and exemplifies the diversity of landholdings present, and thus jurisdictional problems faced. As such, the committee felt nothing could be done to change the land use under the prime minister's personal authority.

Beneath the Nizam and prime minister, other lesser nobility chose to live near the tank. Both Sirdar Diler Jung, also known as Abdul Haq, a high-ranking member of the Nizam's government, and Mehdi Hasan, chief justice of the Hyderabad High Court and later home secretary, lived in homes that they either owned or rented along the tank.⁴¹ These men were part of a large secondary group of elites who fleshed out the ranks of the Nizam's government. Finally, members of the British community resided along Hussain Sagar's shores. Men like W. Pendlebury and Major McCarthy come to us through the conservation report. Pendlebury worked for the Nizam's Guaranteed State Railway while McCarthy worked in the armed forces. For them, like their Indian counterparts, they considered the area a fashionable and valuable place to call home. Yet living next to a waterbody was not without its problems. With the tank forming one edge of their properties, both the activities of the household and the undulating tank waters provided a mutual threat. As such, the authors of the 1890 report recommended that 'the owners of these houses should be directed to construct *puckha* [*pukka* i.e. permanent; proper] compound walls along the boundaries of their grounds on the tank side'.⁴² This proposal would both keep the tank at bay and prevent household waste from polluting its waters.

Efforts to conserve Hussain Sagar reveal the ways in which different class and occupational communities made use of the tank's waters. For some like the dhobis, water was essential to their livelihood in an urban environment, while for others like the city's elites, proximity to the water was an additional marker of status.⁴³

³⁸Modern Saifabad is at the south-west corner of the tank.

³⁹For some history of earlier palaces in Hyderabad, see M.A. Nayeem, *The Royal Palaces of the Nizams* (Hyderabad, 2009).

⁴⁰Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 5.

⁴¹On Mehdi Hasan's time in Hyderabad, see B.B. Cohen, *An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad: Scandal in the Raj* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

⁴²Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 3.

⁴³S.H. Bilgrami and C. Willmott, *Historical and Descriptive Sketch of His Highness the Nizam's Dominions*, vol. II (Bombay, 1884), 608.

Place

If the 1890 and 1899 reports on the conservation of Hussain Sagar identified elites as well as everyday inhabitants of Hyderabad city, they also revealed critical places where the tank's waters and human activity intersected. Places, as Doreen Massey has argued, are always both hybrid and points of interconnection with much longer histories.⁴⁴ As examples, the 1890 report identified two specific places, a cemetery and a shrine, that vitiated the water's quality. At the same time, the tank also came to serve more positive purposes as a site for recreation. Each of these places has deeper connections to the past than the committees of 1890 and 1899 recognized. They existed in a hybrid and thus hydrosocial relationship to their environs and thus provide a window into Hyderabad's greater urban environment at the century's end.

In Secunderabad, there was a Muslim cemetery adjacent to Hussain Sagar. As the cemetery filled over time, it extended beyond its gated bounds. At times, the tank brimmed over with monsoon rain and submerged some of the graves. Here is a parallel example of a kind of 'soaking ecology' that Debjani Bhattacharaya has explored for Calcutta and the Bengal delta, whereby the line between water and land cannot be strictly drawn as it ebbs and flows with larger changes in the environment.⁴⁵ The soaking graves in Secunderabad posed obvious health threats. The 1890 report categorically states, 'It is absolutely necessary to prevent any further interment in this ground.'⁴⁶ Here, the hydrosocial cycle maps onto larger climatic cycles. Fed by the monsoonal rains, the level of the tank rose and fell within the year as did the prevalence of disease within the city itself. Hussain Sagar would be full during the monsoon season, also a time when water-borne diseases plagued the city. Such disease in turn caused a greater number of deaths that consequently put more pressure on the cemetery. The report added one further gruesome detail. 'They [the committee] would mention that on the occasion of their inspecting the Kulaver bay they found a fresh grave that had been partly opened by jackals which contained a decomposing human body. This was close to, if not within, the full contour level of the tank.'⁴⁷ In a moment of success, by 1899, bodies were no longer interred at this location and non-human actors in this example (germs, jackals, etc.) were momentarily kept at bay.

Also singled out in the report of 1890 was a sluice that emptied into Hussain Sagar. Sluices, like pipes, docks, ghats and other tangible infrastructures, are all part of a larger 'techno-sphere' mapped onto the hydrosocial features of Hyderabad.⁴⁸ Adjacent to the sluice, a shrine served the goddess Maisamma. Religious devotees slaughtered sheep, fowl and other creatures in devotion to the

⁴⁴D. Massey, 'Places and their pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), 182–92, at 183. See also reference to 'locality' in Ramesh, 'Flows and fixes', 2.

⁴⁵Bhattacharya, *Empire and Ecology*, 4–6.

⁴⁶Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Sagar Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 3.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁸Ramesh, 'Flows and fixes', 3.

deity.⁴⁹ The effluent flowed directly into the tank, an unacceptable practice for the committee members.

Blood in a more or less putrescent state, and other defilements, drop into the water. The Committee consider that steps should be taken to remove the site for these sacrifices to some place where they cannot pollute the water. The health of 75,000 persons will in future depend largely on the purity of the water, and His Highness' Government will no doubt be able to see its way to the removal of this source of pollution without wounding the religious susceptibilities of those making the sacrifices.⁵⁰

The Maisamma shrine depended on the tank as the destination for the blood and waste produced by its devotional activities. Yet, the importance of Hussain Sagar to the cities made this a fraught relationship compounded by the possibility of relocating a religious shrine. The report hints at the underlying challenge the Nizam's government faced in moving a Hindu place of worship and potentially offending devotees. Similarly to processes taking place in Bombay and other cities, by 1899, the local authorities moved the Maisamma shrine to a different location, thus exercising local (princely and colonial) authority and disruption in religious practice.⁵¹

If the cemetery and sluice exemplified problematic locations linked to Hussain Sagar, so too did the tank serve a more positive role in urban Hyderabad. Across India, when rulers or local elites constructed tanks, they inevitably also built retaining walls called bunds. They were often critical places in the urban as well as rural environments in which humans and water interacted. For Hussain Sagar, the bund between Hyderabad and Secunderabad was initially a mile long and subsequently expanded and elaborated upon over time.⁵²

As part of the initial report in 1890 regarding the conservancy of Hussain Sagar, it was suggested that 'a road should be constructed in continuation of the present bund road as nearly as possible round the borders of the tank. Such a road would help to protect the tank from pollution and would prove a great convenience in forming another line of communication between Hyderabad and

⁴⁹This was a temple to the south Indian goddess Maisamma associated with land. I thank Joyce Flueckiger for helping me better understand this shrine and deity. See also Dube's work on Shamirpet, a village near Hyderabad city: S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (New York, 1967), 96.

⁵⁰Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 2, 4.

⁵¹Colonial officials from Bombay to Ceylon altered access to bathing, cremation and other practices linked to religious practice. See Broich, 'Engineering the empire', 359. On Hyderabad's more recent communal troubles, see I. Copland, "'Communalism' in princely India: the case of Hyderabad, 1930-1940', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), 783-814. Also, for instance, see how Hussain Sagar became the destination for different processions linked to growing Hindu nationalism in the city, even being renamed for the day to Vinayak Sagar. See R. Naidu, *Old Cities, New Predicaments: A Study of Hyderabad* (New Delhi, 1990), 129. 'Vinayak' can mean leader, guide or guru, and is also another name for the Hindu deity Ganesh.

⁵²Bilgrami and Willmott, *Historical and Descriptive Sketch of His Highness the Nizam's Dominions*, vol. II, 607.

Secunderabad.⁵³ By 1899, this had largely been carried out. This road served two immediate purposes. First, it would physically protect the water from pollutants acting as a sort of cement girdle around the tank, and second, it would serve to foster speedier communication between the urban centres at Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Second, this was a time when the first automobiles began to ply the streets sharing the road with phaetons and bicycles. A more robust bund encircling Hussain Sagar would facilitate these emerging forms of transportation.

The tank's bund also came to serve the city's inhabitants in other ways as well, specifically as a site of recreation. Indians and Britons alike shared a collective understanding of recreational spaces that abutted water. Britons understood sites for recreation at places like the English Channel coast, a beach on the Atlantic coast or the banks of a river or babbling brook. In south India, Indian rulers had long made use of bunds as sites for recreation. For instance, 200 kilometres north-east of Hyderabad city is Pakhal tank. Like Hussain Sagar, this tank is technically a reservoir, built by the Kakatiya kingdom of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Following their demise, new rulers took control of the area, and embellished the bund at Pakhal. Recognizing the recreational value of the bund, Shitab Khan had a *chabutra* (platform; dais) built in the middle of the bund at Pakhal so that he could enjoy the cool breezes and pleasant views afforded by the tank.⁵⁴

By the early twentieth century, in Hyderabad, new ideas about the bund and its utility as a place for recreation merged local Indian interests with British ones. A newspaper correspondent from *The Hindu* in 1901 notes that Major Afsur-ud-Daula, a military commander in the Nizam's forces, provided a band to play music on the bund on Saturday evenings. 'Hitherto the bund of the said Tank was very dry and unattractive though a great deal could be done to render the place pleasant and enjoyable, but no steps whatever had been taken.'⁵⁵ Thus, the bund became a public place whereby the inhabitants of urban Hyderabad could enjoy breezes from the tank and the melodious sounds from the band. The tank bund, the shrine and the cemetery existed in a hydrosocial relationship to the tank itself. Bored Britons, devoted Hindus and dead Muslims each played a role in the tank's life, while the tank in turn simultaneously effected those communities.

Power

Imbricated in class and place within the efforts to conserve Hussain Sagar are diverse power relations. Foremost was the need to police individuals' actions that harmed the tank. Second was the need to exert control over the effects of the water, specifically in the example below to address the stench generated from decaying organic material. And finally, the committees of 1890 and 1899 – imbibing new scientific possibilities that the late nineteenth century offered – sought to expand

⁵³Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 9.

⁵⁴H. Cousens, *Lists of Antiquarian Remains in His Highness the Nizam's Territories* (Calcutta, 1900), 49.

⁵⁵*The Hindu*, 29 May 1901, in *Newspaper Cuttings 1896–1901*, T/APSA.

their knowledge of, and power over, the water itself through careful scientific analysis of its contents. Thus, a shift towards a hydrological approach over a hydrosocial one becomes evident as the new century dawned. As such, the conservation of Hussain Sagar reveals the ways in which princely and colonial officials meted out power in an urban environment. Visible is the co-operation between the princely power of Hyderabad and British colonial officials; the shared effort to physically reshape the natural environment and humanity's role in it; and the larger global rise in the hegemony of science to help understand, control and reshape the natural world.

The 1890 committee proffered a series of recommendations regarding the shared policing of Hussain Sagar. The committee felt that a newly created group of watchmen could best control different communities, especially semi-itinerant ones such as dhobis or the random shepherd who brought her beasts to the tank to bathe, drink and wallow. The committee members' recommendations followed larger Indo-British trends that prescribed laws regarding the use of waterbodies and punishments for their violations.⁵⁶ From Hyderabad itself in 1890 the health officer for Chaderghat, Hehir, published a book on water in India. He notes that 'This [pollution of tanks] should be absolutely prevented by the posting of peons, watchmen, or policemen along the margins of the tank.'⁵⁷ Watchmen would physically patrol the entire periphery of Hussain Sagar and be empowered to bring violators to the police. In particular, the much-discussed fence would demarcate the bounds of their authority. The watchmen could seize violators found in a no-go zone between the fence and the water's edge. The committee wrote:

In order that the recommendations herein made may be carried out, the Committee consider that the whole of the area within the fence should be patrolled by watchmen specially appointed for the purpose, who should be empowered to arrest people they may find offending in any of the above named respects, and to hand them over to the Police for prosecution in the courts in whose jurisdiction the offence may be committed.⁵⁸

The Hyderabad government and British officials proceeded to work together to produce this force. They divided the watchmen in proportion to the territory to be patrolled. As such, the Hyderabad side deployed 22 peons and 2 *duffadars* (junior officers) while the British side contributed 7 constables and 1 head constable. To make their task easier, and adopting a paternalist tone (similar to that expressed concerning the dhobis), the committee recognized the long distances that some men would travel to take up their posts, and then the longer distances that their work might entail. As such, the committee recommended that the governments

⁵⁶B. Mukhurji and H.C. Mitra, *The Indian Penal Code, Act Xlv of 1860, with Amendments up to Date, Copious Notes of Indian and English Cases, and a Glossary of Legal Terms Generally Used in the Criminal Law* (Calcutta, 1896). See section 277 regarding the corruption or fouling of water, 195. Violators could face imprisonment or a fine of 500 rupees, or both.

⁵⁷Hehir, *Hygiene of Water and Water Supplies*, 84.

⁵⁸'Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 5.

provide the men with ponies to ride and huts for shelter. The cadre reflects an optimistic form of co-operation between the Hyderabad and British officials regarding Hussain Sagar.

Yet, shared power brought shared problems. The failure of Hyderabad and British officials to successfully rehabilitate Hussain Sagar came from having too many powerholders who could not effectively work together. The 1890 committee recommended that either Hyderabad or British officials appoint an inspector to supervise the watchmen, but by 1899, this position – for unknown reasons – was abolished. One clue comes from the very nature of the system: both the princely power and the colonial state had a stake in Hussain Sagar's conservation, but it remained unclear who was ultimately responsible. The Hyderabad authorities could claim that the tank was 'theirs', but British officials could equally claim a form of sovereignty over not only Hussain Sagar, but all of India. As such, the system of watchmen suffered from the diversity of powers at play and the challenges of princely urbanism.

As water levels in the tank rose and fell over the course of the year, so too did problems arising from these changes. During the monsoon season as water levels rose, weeds that once clung to the tank's bed now broke free and washed ashore. Embedded in this tangled mess were varieties of shellfish that immediately began to decay, and combined with sun and heat, produced a terrific stink. The committee – unable to control the water, the weeds or the fish – sought to have the tangled stinking mess removed once it washed ashore. The committee prodded municipal bodies in both Hyderabad and Secunderabad to take action, 'The attention of the Chadarghat municipality and of the Cantonment Committee should be called to the necessity of removing these weeds and animal matter before the decaying process sets in.' However, the second committee lamented in 1899 that this had yet not been carried out.⁵⁹ Indeed, to this day, the tank remains a source of odorous nuisance to the urban inhabitants of Hyderabad.⁶⁰ The problem was never addressed because neither the Hyderabad nor the British governments felt that the problem was theirs. In other words, multiple jurisdictions spreading across princely and colonial bureaucracy led to inaction.

The final power relation evident in the Hussain Sagar conservation reports is the deployment of science to better understand and control the waters of the tank. By 1890, new developments in science and technology made water analysis not only possible but also useful.⁶¹ One metric under consideration at Hyderabad was the purity of Hussain Sagar's water. Purity, as Pratik Chakrabarti has explored, was central to colonial officialdom's relationship and concerns with water in other parts of

⁵⁹Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 13.

⁶⁰See for instance newspaper coverage of the tank's stench: *The Hindu*, 18 Apr. 2019, 'As temperature goes up, stench from Hussain Sagar rises' by Swathi Vadlamudi, accessed 10 Jun. 2019, www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/as-temperatures-go-up-stench-from-hussainsagar-rises/article26869070.ece.

⁶¹As part of a global trend towards scientific understanding and the ability to further understand and control the natural environment, urban officials in Hyderabad (like Hehir) were actively engaged with the works of men like William Rankine. Hehir cites Rankine when writing about waterworks; see W.J.M. Rankine, *A Manual of Civil Engineering*, 9th edn (London, 1873), 730–3.

India.⁶² To test for purity, in the concluding recommendation of the 1890 report, the committee advised that the water of the tank be ‘chemically and microscopically analysed’ four times per year as well as when the tank was at its highest and lowest points.⁶³ Beyond a visual or olfactory account of the tank’s health, new technologies of chemical and microscopical analysis offered both the Nizam’s and British officials greater understandings of the health of the tank’s water.⁶⁴

Yet, underlying problems of the time ensnared these efforts. By the 1899 report, the authors acidly note that the tank’s waters had never been analysed: ‘This has not been done because it was not made any one’s business to do it.’⁶⁵ In making further recommendations, the latter committee regarded the issue of scientifically analysing the water as one of ‘grave importance’. To help combat the ways in which this issue had fallen between the bureaucratic cracks, the committee delegated the task to the health officer of the Chaderghat Municipality, ‘or some other officer qualified to make such an examination’.⁶⁶ Ultimately, plans to police the fenced area by the tank, plans to clean its banks, and plans to chemically analyse the water, broke down.

Reflections

The 1899 committee recognized the core problem that conserving Hussain Sagar revealed: diversity. The report brought to light the diversity of landholders and occupants who made use of the water – from humble dhobis and fisherfolk to wealthy elites including the Nizam himself; the diversity and multiplicity of places that significantly impacted Hussain Sagar or that it effected, from putrescent blood at the Maisamma shrine to flooded graves; and the nearly impossible task of enforcing power over these groups when that power itself was held by a diverse group of participants, from patrolling watchmen to municipal officers of Indian and British roots.

The committee members acknowledged the different jurisdictions surrounding the tank and that their diversity made enforcement next to impossible. It enumerated the following types of jurisdiction that ringed Hussain Sagar: the Chaderghat Municipality; the Sarf-i-khas secretary; *jagirs*; *paigahs*; and the cantonment magistrate.⁶⁷ By way of summary, the committee highlighted the underlying source of inaction and frustration in the decade since the 1890 committee first sat together.

⁶²P. Chakrabarti, ‘Purifying the river: pollution and purity of water in colonial Calcutta’, *Studies in History*, 31 (2015), 178–205; on notions of purity, see 179–83, and on the Hooghly River, see 189–93.

⁶³Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank’, in ‘Report’, Political Secretary’s Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 13.

⁶⁴This same process of assessing water quality was taking place in colonial Delhi where officials weighed in on ‘taste’ and ‘sweetness’ of water. See A. Sharan, ‘From source to sink: “official” and “improved” water in Delhi, 1868–1956’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48 (2011), 425–62, at 429.

⁶⁵Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank’, in ‘Report’, Political Secretary’s Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 13.

⁶⁶The Health Officer of Chaderghat in 1890 was Patrick Hehir.

⁶⁷*Sarf-i-khas* were government or crown lands; *jagirs* were land tenures whereby revenue was made over to a local official; and *paigahs* were lands held by military tenure and granted to a local official. On the variety of landholders in Hyderabad state, see K. Leonard, ‘The Hyderabad political system and its participants’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30 (1971), 569–82.

'Unity of jurisdiction is, in the opinion of the Committee, the first essential for securing that the measures concerted for conserving the tank shall be effective.'⁶⁸ Yet this 'unity of jurisdiction' had to be mapped onto a socially and geographically diverse populace and urban landscape. Both wealthy elites and the humble folk alike made use of the water's edge, both sacred shrines and cement roadways ringed the tank, and both the Nizam's local forces as well as those of the British participated (or attempted to participate) in the enforcement of a wide range of recommendations.

Attempts to conserve Hussain Sagar were ultimately unsuccessful. While Hyderabad and British officials were able to address some of the recommendations of the 1890 report, others remained unchanged by 1899, and well beyond. The diversity of powerholders involved in the jurisdiction of the tank hampered efforts to keep it clean while at the same time the city continued to grow. Clusters of huts in locales like Saifabad and Khairtabad became established neighbourhoods and more waste continued to flow into the tank. Before more could be done after the 1899 report, in 1908, the city of Hyderabad suffered a devastating flood of the Musi River, and attention turned away from Hussain Sagar to the construction of new flood-prevention tanks that would tame the river.⁶⁹ Yet Hussain Sagar continues to play a role in the urban environment. Badly polluted, the tank is a source of embarrassment and often stench, yet it simultaneously continues to be a source of civic pride for Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Boats sail across its waters, a large statue of the Buddha was erected near its shores, and new governments promise (threaten?) to surround the tank with modern glass high rises.⁷⁰ As such, more than a century later, Hyderabad's urban diversity continues to grapple with the diversity of urban power.

⁶⁸Recommendation of 1st November 1890 of the Committee Appointed to Consider the Question of the Conservancy of the Hussain Saugor Tank', in 'Report', Political Secretary's Office, Sanitation, 15/3/302, T/APSA, 16.

⁶⁹B.B. Cohen, 'Modernising the urban environment: the Musi River flood of 1908 in Hyderabad, India', *Environment and History*, 17 (2011), 409–32.

⁷⁰G.S. Narayan, 'Towers around Hussainsagar: a tall order', *The Hindu*, 10 Dec. 2014; C. Becker, *Shifting Stones, Shaping the Past: Sculpture from the Buddhist Stupas of Andhra Pradesh* (Oxford, 2015), see ch. 3.

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