

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Sena row: SC asks if Speaker contradicted verdict

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court has questioned Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar's decision to determine the "real" Shiv Sena based on legislative majority, asking if this contradicts a previous Constitution Bench judgment.

The Speaker says the 'real' political party is discernible from which faction held the legislative majority at the time of the emergence of the rival factions... Is this not contrary to what we had laid down on May 11?



D.Y. CHANDRACHUD
Chief Justice of India

SUMMARY: The earlier judgment, from May 11, 2023, emphasized that the Speaker should not base their decision solely on which group has a majority in the Legislative Assembly. Instead, the decision should consider the structure of leadership outside the Assembly, particularly the support from the political wing of the party. The Court also noted that the Speaker had refused to accept the 2018 Constitution of the Shiv Sena party, which appointed Mr. Thackeray as president, and instead relied on a constitution from 1999. The Supreme Court set the case for further arguments in April.

AGRICULTURE

Centre estimates dip in onion, potato production

CONTEXT: According to the First Advanced Estimates of area and production of horticultural crops released by the Union Agriculture Ministry, fruit and vegetable production in the country could touch 355.25 million tonnes (MT) in 2023-24.

SUMMARY: The Ministry of Agriculture has released data regarding agricultural production estimates for 2022-23 and 2023-24. In 2022-23, there was a 2.39 % increase in production, reaching 355.48 million tonnes (MT) from 28.44 million hectares. Fruit production reached 110.21 MT, driven by increases in apples, bananas, grapes, mangoes, and watermelon. Vegetable production also rose from 209.14 MT to 212.55 MT. In the first estimates for 2023-24, production is expected to be 355.25 MT, with increases in fruit and vegetable production. Tomatoes are expected to increase by 1.93 %, but onion production is lower at 254.73 lakh tonne compared to last year's 302.08 lakh tonne. Potato production is also expected to decrease to around 589.94 lakh tonne from around 601.42 lakh tonne last year.

HORTICULTURE PRODUCTION

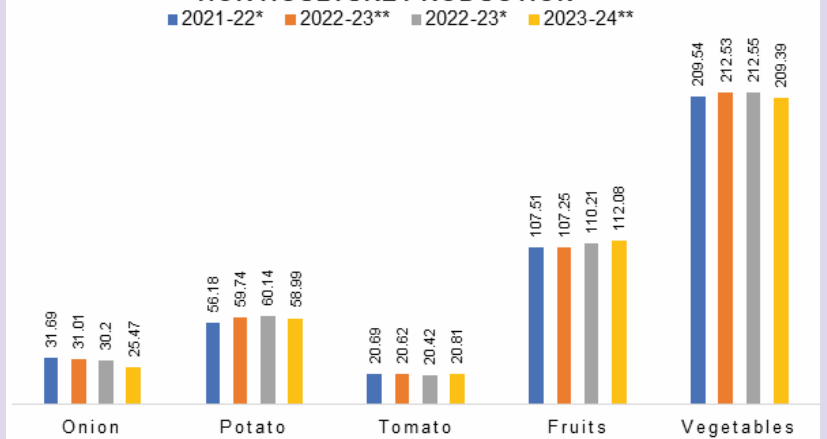


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the First Advanced Estimates of area and production of horticultural crops released by the Union Agriculture Ministry. (* Final Estimates, ** First Estimates).

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INS Kolkata assists vessels hit in Gulf of Aden; rescues 21 crew members

CONTEXT: The Indian Navy swiftly responded to two instances of distress calls by merchant vessels - MV True Confidence and MSC Sky II.



SUMMARY: Indian Naval destroyer INS Kolkata responded to two instances of missile/drone attacks on merchant vessels. On March 6, INS Kolkata rescued 21 crew members from the MV True Confidence after it was hit in the Gulf of Aden. On March 4, INS Kolkata responded to a request from the MSC Sky II, which was hit approximately 90 nautical miles south-east of Aden. The crew of both vessels- MV True Confidence and MSC Sky II, including the injured, were provided medical aid and evacuated to Djibouti. The vessels were escorted to safety, and all crew members, including 13 Indian nationals, are reported safe.

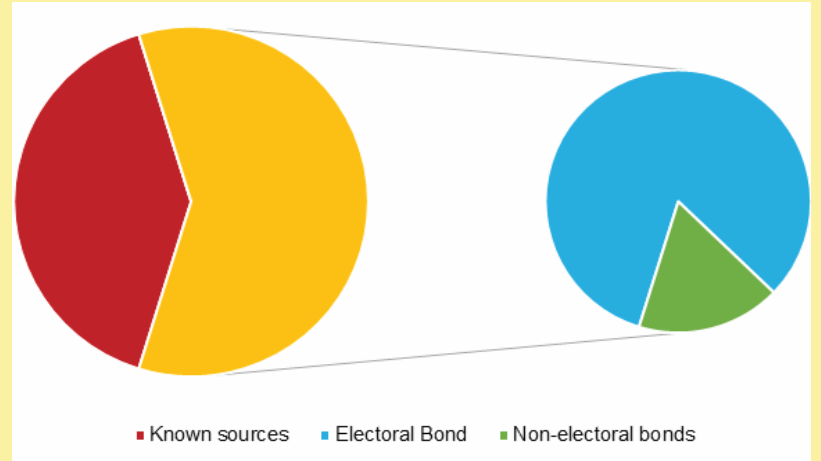


FIGURE: Pie chart representation of share of contribution to the political parties.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) analysed audit reports and donations declared by political parties to the Election Commission of India from 2004-05 to 2022-23. They found that the six national parties collected ₹19,083.08 Cr. during this period. In 2022-23, these parties declared ₹ 3,076.88 Cr. as income, with over 59 % (₹ 1,832.87 Cr.) coming from unknown sources. The majority of this income from unknown sources, amounting to ₹ 1,510.61 Cr (82.42 %), was from electoral bonds.

During 2022-23, the BJP declared ₹ 1,400.23 Cr. as its income from unknown sources. This is equivalent to 76.39 % of the total income from unknown sources declared by all national parties. The Congress came a distant second, claiming 17.19 % of the national pie and declaring ₹ 315.11 crore as its income from unknown sources. All other five national parties together have received only ₹ 432.63 Cr. from unknown sources. The other parties included in the ADR's analysis were the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Aam Aadmi Party, and the National People's Party.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Citizens have right to criticise revocation of Article 370, says SC

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court quashed an FIR accusing a college professor of spreading enmity and disharmony by terming the day of revocation of special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 a "black day" and wishing "happy independence" to the people of Pakistan on a WhatsApp group of faculty and parents.

SUMMARY: A Division Bench stated that calling the day of the abrogation of Article 370 a 'Black Day' as a form of lawful protest. The right to dissent in a lawful manner is integral to the right to a dignified and meaningful life under Article 21 of the Constitution. A mere protest against the decision to revoke Article 370 should not lead to charges under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code, which pertains to promoting enmity among different groups. The invocation of Section 153A requires an intention to promote feelings of enmity or hatred among different groups and should not be misused to suppress dissent. The Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, and every citizen has the right to criticize actions such as the abrogation of Article 370.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

'Political parties got 60% of funds from unknown sources'

CONTEXT: According to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), almost 60 % of the funds received by political parties cannot be traced and come from "unknown" sources, including electoral bonds.

SUMMARY: A report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) indicates that nearly 60% of funds received by political parties in India cannot be traced and are from "unknown" sources, including electoral bonds. Between 2004-05 and 2022-23, the country's six national parties collected ₹ 19,083.08 Cr. from such unknown sources. The BJP received the majority of these funds, with 76.39 % of its income from unknown sources in 2022-23, while the Congress received 17.19 %. At present, political parties are not required to reveal the names of individuals or organisations giving them less than ₹ 20,000. As a result, three-fifths of the funds received cannot be traced and are from 'unknown' sources.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

China calls conflict in Gaza ‘a disgrace to civilisation’

CONTEXT: China described the war in Gaza as a “disgrace to civilisation” and called on Thursday for an immediate ceasefire as the conflict stretched into its sixth month despite efforts by mediators to reach a truce.



SUMMARY: China has condemned the war in Gaza as a "disgrace to civilisation" and called for an immediate ceasefire. The conflict, ongoing for six months, has seen mediation efforts stall. US President Biden has urged Hamas to accept a ceasefire plan before the Muslim fasting month. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized the urgent need for a ceasefire and humanitarian relief. The war has reduced vast stretches of Gaza to a wasteland of gutted buildings and rubble and sparked a humanitarian disaster for its 2.4 million people. The war has devastated Gaza, with 20 people reportedly dying of malnutrition and dehydration. Limited aid has reached the region, where hunger has reached "catastrophic levels."

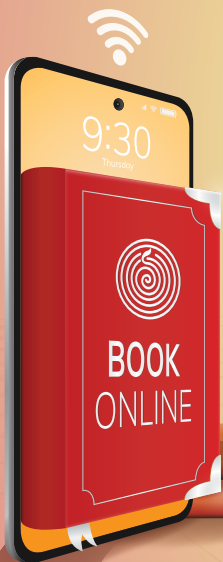
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

13 years after meltdown, Fukushima’s reactor room remains a ‘mystery’

CONTEXT: As Japan prepares to mark the 13th anniversary of its worst-ever nuclear disaster, the Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings (TEPCO) is fighting to bring a sample out of the heart of the site’s radioactive debris.



SUMMARY: As Japan approaches the 13th anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, efforts to clean up the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant are ongoing. Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings (TEPCO) is working to remove damaged fuel debris from the reactors, but much about the debris remains unknown. The key to understanding and cleaning up the debris is a sample of melted fuel from inside a reactor, which has yet to be extracted. This task is described as akin to penetrating the heart of the site’s radioactive debris. The Fukushima Daiichi plant suffered meltdowns in three of its reactors after a 2011 earthquake and tsunami, leading to the release of radiation and displacement of thousands of residents. Approximately 880 tonnes of highly radioactive melted nuclear fuel remain inside the damaged reactors, but the exact condition and location of the fuel are unknown. TEPCO’s efforts to extract a sample of melted debris have been delayed, but they plan to use a previously tested device to extract a preliminary sample while improving the robotic arm for future attempts. Despite setbacks, TEPCO remains committed to learning from these challenges for future cleanup efforts.



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ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

RBI, Bank Indonesia to use local currencies for two-way deals

CONTEXT: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Bank Indonesia (BI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a framework promoting the use of the Indian Rupee (INR) and the Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) for cross-border transactions.

SUMMARY: The MoU covers current-account transactions, permissible capital-account transactions, and other economic and financial transactions agreed upon by both countries. This framework aims to enable exporters and importers to invoice and pay in their domestic currencies, facilitating the development of an INR-IDR foreign exchange market. The use of local currencies is expected to reduce costs and settlement times for transactions, promote trade between India and Indonesia, and deepen financial integration.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

NBFCs, fintech's seek RBI nod to offer credit on UPI

CONTEXT: Non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and fintechs are seeking permission from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to offer credit services on the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) platform, either through credit cards or pre-approved credit lines, both of which are currently reserved for banks.

SUMMARY: Non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and FinTech's propose offering credit through credit cards or pre-approved credit lines. While discussions have been ongoing, formal representations have been made to the RBI. Allowing NBFCs to offer credit on UPI would be beneficial, as UPI is a powerful tool for financial transactions in India. Currently, UPI payments via credit cards are only allowed on the RuPay network, and banks can offer pre-approved credit lines on UPI. However, the RBI is cautious due to customer protection concerns and is evaluating the feasibility of extending credit on UPI to non-bank entities. Industry participants believe that including private lenders, FinTechs, and card networks will increase UPI credit usage, as they are key drivers of small credit and can offer more partnerships and co-lending opportunities.

ISSUES: The regulator's apprehension seems to stem from a customer protection standpoint, where it wants to make sure 'credit on UPI' works as a product offering before they extend it to more players. The RBI has traditionally followed an "incremental policy change" approach, some NBFCs are hopeful the current restrictions are not permanent, and once the central bank has explored the finer aspects and external factors, they will be more conducive to extending the facility to non-banks.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

Cabinet approves ₹10,372 cr. AI corpus

CONTEXT: The Union Cabinet approved a corpus of ₹ 10,371.92 Cr. to fund Artificial Intelligence computing infrastructure and start-ups in the AI space.

SUMMARY: The AI corpus would provide viability gap funding, subsidise projects, including the development of Graphics Processor Units (GPUs) in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) mode that may face steeper costs for setting up datacentres and other such facilities. It will also contribute to application development for government use. The corpus is the Centre's largest direct investment in AI, even as efforts to bring more semiconductor fabrication, design and assembly facilities are underway. The corpus will be disbursed through the India AI Mission launched last year.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

India's Maritime Development Fund likely by year end

CONTEXT: The contours and spending guidelines of the Maritime Development Fund are being discussed with participation expected from industry stakeholders, financial institutions, and Ministries.

SUMMARY: India has proposed a long-term, affordable financial instrument as Maritime Development Fund to support indigenous ship-building expected to be operational by the end of the year. The model of the Maritime Development Fund could either be a maritime vertical under a development finance institution or creating a standalone company with multi-agency equity.

BACKGROUND: Currently, India spends about \$ 75 billion annually on leasing ships from outside. India owns about 2 % of the world's total tonnage and has some 1,500-odd ships under its flag.

SIGNIFICANCE: A local ship-building industry with the entire value chain – that include ship-building, flagging, ownership financing, leasing, among others is expected to help India owns about 5 % of the world's total tonnage. The Maritime Development Fund would also promote cruise tourism and activities like mechanisation and capacity expansion of existing ports via PPP, etc.

ISSUE: Indian shipping companies struggle to grow tonnage "due to difficulties in accessing required finance", as there is a mismatch in tenure of loan offered (5 to 10 years) versus life of vessel (generally 30-odd or more years). The lack of infrastructure status limit potential for long-term low-cost funds for shipping, making it a less attractive sector. The 'infrastructure' status granted to ship building sector would enable vessel operators shipping companies to raise long term-low-cost finance.

FUNDING MECHANISMS: The Maritime Development Fund with a proposed corpus of ₹ 25,000 Cr. over a seven-year-period involve multiple funding mechanisms — debt, equity, VGF and buyer credit support will be part of the fund mandate.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Prachanda aims at 'renewed push' for the Nepal Left as new govt. gets going

CONTEXT: Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda formed a new Cabinet by inducting Ministers from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), his new main coalition partner, and two other parties after breaking the one-year-old alliance with the Nepali Congress.



SUMMARY: Prachanda, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), has broken ties with the Congress party and joined forces with former Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli of the CPN-UML. This move aims to revitalize the "Leftist movement" in Nepal. Prachanda's decision was influenced by disagreements within the Congress party and his desire for more control over the government. The Maoist-Congress relationship had deteriorated, leading Prachanda to seek a new alliance. Despite an earlier agreement to hand over power to the Congress, Prachanda chose to ally with Oli to maintain power. This switch reflects Prachanda's history of changing alliances for personal gain. The new Maoist-UML alliance may benefit China's strategic interests, while India has not yet responded to the political developments in Nepal.

BACKGROUND: The CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre had merged in 2018 to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in a bid to form a large Left force in Nepal. However, power struggle between Prachanda and Mr. Oli led to the implosion of the NCP in 2021. After facing a gradual electoral decline over the years, the Maoist Centre fought the 2022 general elections under an alliance with Congress. After the Congress party's refusal to let him lead the government in December 2022, Prachanda swiftly sided with Mr. Oli, and was elected Prime Minister with the CPN-UML's backing. However, in February last year, the UML pulled out of the government after the Maoist Centre decided to support the Congress candidate in the presidential poll.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

For India's homeless women, TB care is shaped by gender norms and economic precarity

CONTEXT: India has the highest number of TB cases globally, with an estimated prevalence of 85 cases per 1,000 among the homeless population.

BACKGROUND: Overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, malnutrition, weak immunity, HIV coinfection, alcoholism, smoking, and tobacco chewing increase the risk of tuberculosis (TB) among homeless populations. Lack of shelter complicates access to healthcare, leading to delayed diagnosis and treatment, and an increased likelihood of developing drug-resistant strains. TB is often perceived as a 'male disease' due to more men being notified, but it is a disease of inequity, with women's health outcomes influenced by the social support available to them.

ACCESS TO NUTRITION, FINANCE

India's Nikshay Poshan Yojana (NKY), integrated into the national TB programme in 2018, offers a monthly cash incentive of ₹ 500 through direct benefit transfers (DBT). Nikshay Mitra, launched in 2022 provides food baskets worth ₹ 700 and allows patients to register on a web-based portal for information and doctor connections. Homeless women face challenges accessing these benefits due to requirements like ID cards and bank accounts.

Homeless women often lack identity documents, bank accounts, and access to digitized services, making it difficult for them to access nutrition services and other benefits. Illiteracy rates are high among homeless women, who often work as contractual laborers and live in shacks. Even when women have bank accounts, patriarchal norms can undermine their autonomy, with husbands using their earnings for alcohol or drugs. In Delhi, NGO Humana observed that behavioural habits associated with poverty, like alcoholism, meant husbands used the woman's money for alcohol or drugs.

In some cases, money given to women for nutritional support was used for buying food for the entire family, rather than focusing on the women's specific nutritional needs. Good nutrition is crucial in tuberculosis (TB) care, as poor nutrition contributes to at least 55% of new TB cases in India. Conversely, regular nutritional support for individuals and families could reduce TB disease by 39-48%, according to a study published in The Lancet.

ACCESS TO THE POINT OF DIAGNOSIS, CARE

Diagnosing tuberculosis (TB) is challenging due to its vague early symptoms, such as recurring cough, fever, or low appetite, which can be common for people living in poverty or without access to good nutrition. Women, especially those living on the street without family support, are at a high risk of not reaching a diagnosis. The journey from the onset of coughing to confirmed TB is longer and more difficult for women compared to men. A 2023 study in PLOS One showed one-third of TB cases in India go undiagnosed each year, with a higher proportion among female patients, possibly due to lack of awareness and stigma associated with the disease.

Diagnosing tuberculosis (TB) is a prolonged process that rarely provides an instant answer. Suspected patients must provide a sputum sample or undergo an X-ray, which can be challenging for

An advertisement for Vedhik IAS Academy. It features a smiling woman in a blue and white plaid shirt pointing towards the camera. In the background, there are blurred figures of people in a classroom or office setting. The Vedhik IAS Academy logo, which consists of a red spiral, is positioned in the top right corner of the ad. Below the logo, the text reads "VEDHIK IAS ACADEMY" and "The New Learning Mantra". The website address "www.vedhikiasacademy.org" is also present. At the bottom of the ad, there is a white box with the text "Comprehensive Coaching For 568 Government Jobs" and the website address "www.vedhikiasacademy.org" again.

women without counselling and privacy. This can affect the quality of the sample and results. Sputum microscopy may be ineffective in detecting extrapulmonary TB, which is more common among women. The prolonged process and repeated visits may also seem unnecessary to women who may attribute their cough to other factors, such as living in a polluted environment.

Since 2017, the National Tuberculosis Programme in India has been conducting active case finding (ACF) outside healthcare settings among high-risk populations. However, the first report on ACF's effectiveness showed that the quality of the process was "sub-optimal nationally." Only 9.3% of the population was screened, with just 1% of those screened undergoing testing, and 3.7% of those tested being diagnosed with tuberculosis (TB).

For homeless women with tuberculosis (TB), the treatment process can be punishing, involving multiple visits for diagnosis and medication over the six-month treatment period. Before COVID-19, most centres provided medicines for a week to encourage return visits for monitoring adherence and side effects. However, women face mobility and financial challenges, making it difficult to return to the same dispensary consistently. Treatment literacy and counselling quality for homeless women are lower compared to other groups, leading to higher chances of dropping off medications once they feel better. Shortages of anti-TB drugs also deter homeless women from returning for treatment.

BUILDING ECOSYSTEMS OF CARE

The study recommends that the TB Mukht Bharat programme should recognize homelessness and gender, legally incorporating the rights to healthcare for homeless individuals and women under Union and State government schemes. It suggests that homeless TB patients require double the effort in terms of counselling and tracking compared to non-homeless patients, while homeless women TB patients require four times the effort.

National Park is seen as a conservation effort with tourism benefits. However, there are concerns about political influence, highlighted by issues in Corbett Park. The Court has recommended guidelines for safaris, urging the government to be cautious in its messaging about tourism and conservation.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Troubled waters

CONTEXT: Chinese vessels deployed water cannons at a civilian boat operated by Philippine military in South China Sea.

SUMMARY: Tensions between China and the Philippines escalated over China's actions in the South China Sea, including blocking a Philippine resupply mission near Second Thomas Shoal, known as Ren'ai Jiao in China, which lies about 200 km from the Philippine Island of Palawan. A group of sailors have been living on board a warship that was sunk by the Philippine forces 25 years ago to reinforce their sovereignty claims. The Philippines accused China of reckless and illegal behaviour, while China blamed the Philippines for intruding into disputed waters. The incident reflects ongoing disputes over territorial claims, with China claiming almost all of the South China Sea and seizing Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012. In September last year, Philippine forces removed a 300-metre floating barrier installed by China near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, which triggered a warning from Beijing. The Philippines, backed by a favourable ruling from The Hague, continues to assert its sovereignty over the area. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in June 2022, has adopted a more assertive stance against China, strengthening ties with the U.S. and enhancing Philippines' defence capabilities. China views the growing U.S.-Philippines cooperation as a challenge and has criticized Washington for using Manila as a pawn. However, China's unilateral claims and coercive actions in the region are straining its relations with neighbouring countries, and it should consider dialogue and engagement to resolve disputes.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A slippery slope

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court condemned the illegal felling of over 6,000 trees to construct buildings, ostensibly for "eco-tourism" at the Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, as a "classic case" of nexus between politicians and officials working to ransack the environment for short-term commercial ends.

SUMMARY: The Supreme Court of India criticized the Uttarakhand government for illegally felling 6,000 trees in Jim Corbett National Park to expand a tiger safari. The court emphasized the importance of protecting tigers for ecosystem well-being and condemned illegal construction and tree felling. It raised concerns about the link between political corruption and environmental damage, particularly in wildlife parks. The court suggested that wildlife safaris should focus on eco-tourism rather than commercial tourism, although some argue for the latter for local employment. The court recommended that the Centre develop guidelines for safaris to prevent further environmental damage.

DISCUSSION: The Central Zoo Authority and the National Tiger Conservation Authority, both affiliated with the Union Environment Ministry, support wildlife safaris within guidelines to promote conservation and raise public awareness. They emphasize eco-tourism over commercial tourism but acknowledge the potential for local employment. The recent cheetah translocation to Kuno



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