Bridging the Gap: The Kerala Sastrasahitya Parishad (KSSP) and the Structural Challenges of Science Popularization in India

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the ongoing difficulties of scientific popularization in India, focusing on the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), one of the most successful grassroots science groups in India. KSSP's "science for social revolution" model characterized by extensive literacy campaigns, public lectures, accessible vernacular publications, and cultural instruments such as street plays has attained significant success in Kerala, however its replication across India is constrained. This study asserts that KSSP's success is not just attributable to its methodologies but is dependent on a distinctive convergence of socio-political elements particular to Kerala, including its history of social reform and elevated

literacy rates. In addition to the lack of similar conducive habitat, extensive scientific popularization initiatives across India are obstructed also by entrenched, systemic obstacles including lesser social mobility across classes and other social sects, lack of funding, the dominance of English in science communication and a continual conservative, top-down institutional methodology that repudiates community involvement along with a general atmosphere of superstition, skepticism, partisanship, and the widespread dissemination of disinformation.This essay attempts a critical survey of KSSP's grassroots tactics and contrasts them with the national context to identify important structural constraints. The conclusion advocates a redefined framework to enhance the efficacy and democratic nature of scientific communication in India.

Keywords: Science Popularisation, KSSP (Kerala Sastrasahitya Parishad), Scientific Temper, Science Communication, People's Science Movements, Vernacular Science, Public Understanding of Science.

Introduction

The interplay between science and society in India has been characterized by significant tensions. Despite the establishment of advanced scientific institutes and the emergence of famous scholars, scientific literacy is disturbingly deficient among the mass of the populace. This paradox exposes fundamental structural issues in the production, communication, and accessibility of scientific information to the general populace. The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), established in 1962, evolved from a small collective of scince writers into what is regarded by many as the preeminent people's science movement globally. Franke and Chasin note in their examination of Kerala's growth that “KSSP originated as a collective of science writers with the specific aim of disseminating scientific literature in the vernacular” (107). Over time, it transformed into a widespread movement interacting with several areas such as education, health, environment, and development. This paper analyzes how KSSP's

development reveals both the potential and constraints of science popularization initiatives in overcoming the structural obstacles that disconnect scientific information from people who need it the most. It also contends that effective science communication in developing nations necessitates not only the translation of scientific content into local languages but also a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationships among science, governmental institutions, and civil society, as evidenced by an analysis of KSSP's historical evolution, organizational strategies, and involvement with critical social issues.

Historical Context: The Genesis of People's Science Movements in India

The origin of people's science movements in India is inextricably linked to the nationalist struggle and the social reform movements that preceded independence. Ekbal and Isaac assert that the origins of KSSP are linked to the national awakening during the freedom struggle:

> Development of feelings of national identity among the Malayalees, cutting across the political boundaries that divided the present day Kerala, gave rise to various people's organisations such as trade unions and political parties on an all Kerala basis. The first and foremost among these organisations was the "All Kerala Literary Forum" (*Samastha Kerala Sahithya Parishad*) formed in 1927." (Ekbal and Isaac 10).

This backdrop is essential as it demonstrates that the pursuit of science in vernacular languages was intrinsically linked to the larger endeavor of cultural and political self-determination.

While elsewhere in India colonial era created a unique circumstance in which contemporary scientific information was available only in English and restricted to the elite who had Western education, Kerala had specific advantages in the development of vernacular scientific literatureconsequent to the comparatively high literacy rates and a robust heritage of vernacular education originating in the eighteenth century. Kannan's research on rural workers'

mobilization indicates that “Kerala’s extensive network of schools and the sustained growth of vernacular education during the British era established a basis for mass education that set it apart from the majority of other Indian states.” The literacy infrastructure was essential for subsequent endeavors in scientific communication (Kannan 42). This foundation, however, proved inadequate for the grandiose objectives that KSSP would ultimately seek to achieve.

Architects of the nation saw scientific advancement as fundamental to nation-building. Jawaharlal Nehru’s concept of “scientific temper” was institutionalized in national policy, leading to the development of many projects aimed at fostering scientific awareness. Nonetheless, these initiatives often remained exclusive to urban, educated elite. The establishment of KSSP in 1962 signified a novel approach, grounded in the acknowledgment that science must be democratized not only regarding access to information but also concerning who could engage in determining what constitutes pertinent scientific knowledge and its application to societal issues.

From Science Writing to Social Revolution: KSSP's Ideological Evolution

The metamorphosis of KSSP from a platform for scientific writers into a widespread movement signifies one of the most notable organizational developments in the annals of science communication. The primary emphasis was specifically professional, addressing the technical challenges of generating scientific publications in Malayalam. This restricted understanding evolved significantly when KSSP activists immersed themselves more profoundly in Kerala’s socioeconomic context. The organization’s development was influenced by three main groups of activists who came together from divergent backgrounds with different motives. Ekbal and Isaac characterize these individuals as “social reformers and activists who perceive science as a valuable ally in their fight against the antiquated past. Secondly, there were scientific writers primarily focused on their professional challenges and saw the organization as a method to address these issues. The third group of individuals who

contributed to the establishment of the KSSP included Malayali scientists employed in different scientific organizations throughout India" (12). The amalgamation of these entities fostered a distinctive corporate culture that harmonized professional acumen with social responsibility.

The adoption of the motto "Science for Social Revolution" in 1973 was a pivotal stage in the formation of KSSP. This statement encapsulated a fundamentally distinct understanding of scientific communication compared to the existing ones. KSSP proposed a perspective in which scientific knowledge is not merely seen as neutral information sent from professionals to the uninformed but as a tool for empowerment among the oppressed. Venkateswaran's analysis of India's people's science movements elucidates that the AIPSN, of which KSSP is a founding member, posits that society is bifurcated into two sectiions: one segment perpetually impoverished while a small minority is consistently enriched, both absolutely and relatively, at the expense of the former and the planet. Science, as a catalyst for productive forces, both relies on and bolsters capitalism within this analytical framework.

This ideological position was profoundly shaped by the British Social Relations of Science movement, especially with the contributions of J. D. Bernal and J. B. S. Haldane. During the1930s, these scientists contended that research inside a capitalist framework was inherently skewed by class interests, asserting that its full potential could only be achieved via socialist planning. In their extensive analysis of Kerala's developmentFranke and Chasin observe:

> Social Relations of Science Group, which emerged in Britain during the 1930s, particularly through J. D. Bernal's seminal work *Science in History*, offered theoretical frameworks that enabled KSSP activists to perceive science not merely as a realm of technical proficiency but as a fundamental aspect of social relations capable of either bolstering or contesting prevailing power structures. (108).

This conceptual model enabled KSSP to see science not as a separate realm of technical proficiency but as an essential component of social interactions that could either support or contest prevailing power systems.

Organizational Innovation: Creating Mass Engagement with Science

The success of KSSP in establishing a mass base was founded on exceptional organizational innovations that set it apart from governmental scientific communication initiatives and university outreach programs. The movement produced a unique array of activities that targeted individuals across many demographics, including women, children, teachers, workers, professionals, and farmers. This multifaceted strategy acknowledged that different stakeholders need distinct engagement approaches and that successful scientific communication required ongoing contact rather than isolated events.

The *Science Jathas*—mobile scientific processions—emerged as KSSP's most emblematic idea. Parameswaran elucidates their development: "A significant advancement in the mass contact initiative of Parishath was the Science Jathas. The first Science Jatha in the State may have been a procession conducted by delegates after the 8th Annual Conference in Ernakulam in 1970, leading to the venue of a public lecture on Science" (Ekbal and Isaac 16). These *jathas* transformed from basic processions into intricate multimedia spectacles that included street theater, folk arts, music, and scientific displays. The 1977 Scientific Cultural Jatha was a collective of scientific advocates that traversed Kerala for thirty-seven days, delivering talks at twenty to thirty locations daily. The Jatha stopped at nine hundred locations, engaged with over five hundred thousand individuals, and sold booklets totaling more than Rs. 25,000 (Ekbal and Isaac 16).

The amalgamation of science and cultural expressions constituted a significant advancement in rendering scientific concepts accessible and captivating. KSSP activists created short plays, songs, and performances to convey scientific principles using common

cultural idioms instead of the dry, technical language found in textbooks. Venkateswaran characterizes the People's Science Movement's methodology, noting that *jatha* denotes a procession, a conventional socio-cultural assembly of people at diverse social and religious events, typically including songs, music, and performances. By incorporating Brechtian-style Street dramas, skits, and songs into the *jatha*, these processions evolved into a type of powerful and expressive theater that attacked societal realities. Science advocates would traverse various locations, articulating PSM perspectives on topics to the public in informal settings such as marketplaces and street corners, where engagement by disadvantaged individuals was more probable. This perspective recognized that "communication is a cultural process, a dynamic that must be capable of shifting in multiple directions and manners" (Mazzonetto 5). The cultural packaging enhanced the scientific information by making it more relevant to individuals' life experiences and concerns rather than diminishing it.

KSSP made a notable advancement in formal education by establishing scientific groups and organizing talent contests. By 1975, the group had established more than 1,500 school science clubs, offering an alternative environment for scientific education outside the constraints of formal curriculum. The *Eureka Science Talent Test* and *Sastra Keralam Quiz* garnered significant participation, with over 400,000 students each year, illustrating that well-organized scientific endeavors may profoundly engage the imagination of youth on a large scale. These programs thrived because they were intended not to assess memorized information but to foster "a spirit of inquiry, prompting informed questions and initiating a pursuit for novel answers" (Mazzonetto 2).

Confronting Structural Barriers: Language, Resources, and Institutional Power

KSSP's experience, despite its organizational ingenuity, demonstrates inherent structural obstacles that grassroots organizing alone cannot surmount. The language barrier

illustrates this issue. KSSP illustrated the feasibility of high-quality scientific communication in Malayalam; yet, the predominance of English in Indian science presents persistent problems. This structural reality renders the most exemplary scientific research mostly unavailable to non-English speakers, while vernacular science communication consistently lags, focusing on translating and adapting English-produced work instead of creating unique material.

The financial limitations confronting grassroots scientific initiatives are also formidable. KSSP has preserved financial autonomy via book sales and member donations, circumventing reliance on government funding that may undermine its crucial position. This self-sufficiency incurs a price. Venkateswaran observes in his examination of AIPSN's organizational framework that the entity primarily functions via volunteer labour and local financial contributions. AIPSN, as a concept, neither obtains regular donations nor takes funds from international funding organizations. The voluntary contributions of in-kind resources, including knowledge, time, and talent, are the fundamental resource of these movements. The professionalization of scientific communication as a career area has been impeded by the absence of career pathways in science communication. (Abrol 85). The economic circumstances dictate that a significant portion of KSSP's efforts relies on volunteers who must reconcile their activism with their livelihoods, so limiting the time and energy allocated to scientific communication endeavors.

KSSP has had to manage a complicated relationship with governmental entities. The movement's critical position on government policies—especiallyregarding projects such as Silent Valley—has sometimes led to conflicts with government and its scientific institutions. On the other hand it had partnered with government initiatives, particularly in the Total Literacy Campaign and *Janakeeyasoothranam*(People’s Plan Movement). This dichotomic relationship foregrounds a principal structural issue: in a democratic society, how can citizens exert substantive control over scientific and technological advancement when pertinent

knowledge and decision-making authority are centralized within state and corporate entities that are predominantly shielded from public accountability?

Environmental Activism: The Silent Valley Campaign as Paradigm

The Silent Valley Movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s exemplifies KSSP's most crucial intervention in scientific policy and serves as its most effective illustration of how science communication may facilitate public engagement in technical decision-making. The dispute focused on a planned hydropower project that would inundate a large stretch of tropical rainforest which is a bio diversity hotspot and habitat to many endemic species. KSSP's engagement converted a potentially limited technical disagreement among specialists into an extensive public discourse over developmental objectives, environmental conservation, and democratic governance.

KSSP's methodology in spearheading the Silent Valley Movement exhibited advanced scientific investigation and proficient public communication. The *Parishath* convened a multidisciplinary expert team that undertook independent research, resulting in the publication *The Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project: A Techno-Economic and Socio-Political Assessment*. This investigation determined that "Silent Valley is among the most biologically affluent, ancient, least disturbed, and extensive continuous forest areas in the Western Ghats that could be preserved... The dam's development will inundate 830 hectares of protected woodland, including the vital riparian ecology" (Ekbal and Isaac24–25). KSSP's criticism extended beyond ecological issues to the project's economic assumptions and technological design, contending that other energy sources could provide equivalent advantages without causing environmental harm.

The campaign exposed the difficulties of disseminating intricate ecological principles. KSSP activists needed to explain not just the immediate consequences of river damming but also abstract notions such as ecosystem integrity, biodiversity, and ecological cascades—

concepts that had only recently emerged in scientific discourse and lacked an established lexicon in Malayalam. Venkateswaran elucidates in his thorough research that the People's Science Movements faced the issue of conveying intricate environmental science to the general populace. By engaging in the ecological discourse over the Silent Valley dam and delineating both urgent and long-term health and rehabilitation concerns subsequent to the Bhopal gas tragedy in the mid-1980s, these movements were propelled into the domain of science-society interactions. By integrating the knowledge of scientists with the experiences of lay science activists, PSMs enhanced their critical comprehension of developmental strategies to establish people-centric science-society connections. The movement needed to establish new paradigms for understanding the interplay between nature and development—paradigms that challenged the dominant belief that any rise in energy production or agricultural yield inherently signified progress.

The effective effort to halt the Silent Valley project showed that educated public sentiment may triumph over influential development interests when supported by genuine scientific evidence. Nevertheless, the campaign revealed schisms among progressive groups over the interplay between environmental conservation and growth. The *Parishath* encountered criticism from trade unions and political parties that viewed environmental issues as a luxury unaffordable for a financially constrained state like Kerala. This contradiction highlights continuing arguments among grassroots science groups over the equilibrium between ecological sustainability and the urgent material needs of impoverished communities.

Health, Education, and Technology: Expanding the Scope of People's Science

Although environmental initiatives attracted much public interest, KSSP's ongoing efforts in health, education, and sustainable technology may eventually have a more profound influence on the lives of ordinary people. KSSP initiated a *People's Health Movement* in the health sector, which contested the existing paradigm of healthcare and the commodification of

medical services. The movement's health initiative underscored that "The medical profession's role in enhancing the population's health status is merely secondary. The principal determinant is the socio-economic circumstances of the populace." The health activists consistently emphasized the social determinants of health in their campaigns (Ekbal and Isaac 42).

This strategy resulted in several important campaigns addressing medication safety, nutrition, and basic healthcare. KSSP's publication *Banned, Bannable and Essential Drugs* sold in excess of 35,000 copies, contributing to public education on pharmaceutical industry practices and sensible drug use. The group executed a comprehensive health survey across Kerala to record morbidity trends and identify deficiencies in health care. These actions revealed that successful health communication necessitates more than the dissemination of medical knowledge; it requires addressing the social and economic determinants of health and confronting the influence of pharmaceutical firms and the medical establishment.

While continuing to critique the existing teaching- learning paradigm and curriculum, KSSP devised alternate methods pertaining to the former and conducted in-depth and extensive research regarding school curriculum and syllabi. The initiative's efforts with science clubs, instructor training, and curriculum design have impacted hundreds of thousands of children. More fundamentally, KSSP established what Mazzonetto characterizes as methodologies whereby "communication is cultivated on two tiers of knowledge-sharing. One aspect pertains to the information disseminated to the populace by specialists, while the other pertains to traditions and popular practices transmitted through generations in villages for centuries, serving as a symbol of sustainable development that need to be included into the nation's cultural legacy" (Mazzonetto 5). This dialogic method markedly contrasts with the transmission paradigm prevalent in formal education, proposing alternative pedagogies that recognize and appreciate students' prior knowledge and experiences.

The movement's interaction with technology has concentrated on creating and advocating "appropriate technologies"—innovations that are economically viable, ecologically friendly, and feasible for local production and maintenance. Examples include fuel-efficient stoves, hot boxes rainwater collection devices, and small-scale processing technology for agricultural commodities. The *Integrated Rural Technology Centre* of KSSP has emerged as a hub for the study and demonstration of such technologies. This effort exemplifies the notion that "science and technology should be regulated by public values" rather than exclusively by market dynamics or centralized planning (Raina 128).

The Literacy Movement: Achievements and Contradictions

KSSP's involvement in Kerala's Total Literacy Campaign was both a significant accomplishment and acause of persistent discord within the People's Science Movement . The initiative, started in Ernakulam district in 1989 and later extended statewide, engaged over 500,000 volunteers and significantly decreased illiteracy rates. Parameswaran observes :

> The Ernakulam TLC served as a pivotal moment, or more accurately, a booster rocket for PSM. It was a synthesis of intellect, labor, and emotion. Approximately thirty thousand volunteers engaged in the initiative, anticipating no compensation other than the intrinsic satisfaction derived from promoting literacy (Parameswaran 55).

The literacy program afforded KSSP unparalleled scale and governmental backing. It also facilitated the movement's expansion into regions where it previously had less representation. Nonetheless, the literacy initiative also prompted essential inquiries about the relationship between popular movements and the state. Certain KSSP participants expressed concern that close participation with government initiatives might undermine the movement's autonomy and critical perspective. Some questioned whether the emphasis on literacy detracted from efforts in science communication and policy advocacy.

The literacy campaign exposed the shortcomings of the "deficit model" of social transformation. Although fundamental literacy is undeniably crucial, KSSP's experience showed that "simply disseminating information or facts" is inadequate (Mazzonetto 2). The group determined that neo-literates needed ongoing involvement through continuing education programs, libraries, and opportunities to use their reading abilities in economically beneficial ways. This acknowledgment prompted KSSP to broaden its scope to include women's self-help groups, micro-enterprise development, and participatory planning—endeavors that extended the concept of a "science movement" while demonstrating the organization's dedication to comprehensive social reform.

Contemporary Challenges: Neoliberalism, Communalism, and the Future of People's Science

The structural obstacles confronting people's science movements have escalated in recent decades due to the emergence of neoliberal economic policies and religious extremism. The neoliberal transformation of science—characterized by the privatization of research, the commercialization of information via intellectual property rights, and corporate influence over regulatory mechanisms—presents significant challenges to the conception of science as a public benefit. According to Abrol, "The past two decades have witnessed the establishment of a novel category of private property rights known as Intellectual Property Rights. The purpose of this activity was twofold. Initially, it aimed to provide a facade of individual innovation to validate fundamentally corporate rights. The second was to significantly broaden the scope of these rights" (Abrol 72).

This shift influences not only the funding and organization of scientific research but also the inquiries pursued and the interests represented. Venkateswaran elucidates that the profit-driven economy influences not only the application of science and technology but also the very process of knowledge generation. In a capitalist system, scientific and technological

advancements may primarily benefit a select few, increasing their wealth, while negatively affecting the lower socioeconomic classes and developing nations. Research inquiries that serve the public interest may be disregarded due to their lack of alignment with elite goals. This presents a conundrum for public science movements: how to foster scientific literacy and rational thought when scientific organizations are increasingly motivated by commercial profit rather than public welfare? The legitimacy of science among the general populace may be compromised not by ignorance, but by legitimate suspicion about the interests served by scientific organizations.

The emergence of religious fanaticism and identity politics presents a distinct issue. KSSP and similar groups have always opposed superstition and advocated for rational thought; nevertheless, they today confront organized movements that overtly reject secular scientific rationality in favor of religiously influenced epistemologies. These movements often possess substantial resources and governmental backing. Kannan observes in his examination of Kerala's social movements that "The Parishath has encountered growing resistance from fundamentalist organizations spanning various religious communities. These parties have sought to create rival institutions that replicate KSSP's functions while advancing sectarian objectives, so posing considerable obstacles to secular scientific education" (Kannan 156).

Contemporary science movements must address what Ganesh identifies as the problem of "identity politics," which is influenced by variables such as elite formation, dispossession, and postmodernism. Public sector managers must use the mobilization of science to unify those who remain separated by caste, race, and religion (Ganesh 111). This necessitates not just the defense of science against anti-scientific assaults but also a critical analysis of the historical involvement of scientific institutions in caste and class systems. The objective should be to establish a scientific worldview that is both methodologically rigorous and democratically governed.

Towards a Democratic Science: Lessons from KSSP's Experience

KSSP's six-decade experience provides essential insights for anyone interested in the democratization of science and technology. The key lesson is that effective scientific communication is inextricably linked to issues of power and social structure. Raghunandanan contends in his evaluation of the movement's viewpoint that:

> Science and technology possess a dual nature within capitalism... The advancement of knowledge is not a seamless illumination of obscure areas. Science transforms into a tool of oppression when the quest for private riches and reckless governmental authority propel endeavors related to warfare, spying, exploitation, and devastation. (126–27).

This comprehension indicates that public science initiatives must function on several levels concurrently. They must disseminate scientific information and counteract superstition, which is the conventional realm of science communication. However, they must also participate in policy advocacy—contesting decisions about technological selections, research goals, and regulatory frameworks that are usually determined in secrecy by technical specialists and political elites. They must endeavor to establish alternative institutions and practices—community-oriented health programs, suitable technology, and participatory planning processes—that exemplify the potential for a new connection between science and society.

KSSP's organizational framework provides significant insights for constructing movements that may function at many levels. Franke and Chasin note that "The Parishath's organizational structure, which integrates volunteer activists, professional staff, democratic decision-making, and financial self-sufficiency through book sales and member contributions, has demonstrated considerable resilience" (115). This model illustrates the necessity of preserving autonomy from governmental oversight and market influences while retaining the adaptability to engage in collaborative efforts with governmental initiatives when such alliances benefit the populace. The readiness to adopt contentious stances, despite potential

backlash from governmental entities or established political factions, underscores the importance of organizational independence. KSSP's capacity to engage with government initiatives, when aligned with public objectives, demonstrates pragmatic flexibility.

Nonetheless, KSSP's experience also exposes constraints that every people's science movement must confront. The group continues to rely mostly on educated middle-class activists while attempting to address the needs of the impoverished and oppressed. The most effective campaigns have often transpired when public mobilization coincided with elite opinion, as shown by the Silent Valley case, when scientists and environmentalists endorsed KSSP's stance. People's movements face far greater challenges in succeeding when confronted with cohesive resistance from political and technical elites, irrespective of the robustness of their scientific rationale.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad from a modest assembly of scientific writers to a widespread movement involving hundreds of thousands of individuals exemplifies one of the most notable endeavors in the democratization of science globally. KSSP's experience illustrates that it is feasible to foster public engagement with science that goes beyond passive information intake, involving active participation in discussions about science policy and technological decisions. The movement demonstrates that individuals, when equipped with adequate support and tools, can meaningfully engage with intricate scientific matters and make informed judgments on topics that affect their lives.

KSSP's challenges simultaneously expose the systemic obstacles that limit the potential accomplishments of even the most successful scientific movements. The pre-eminence of English in Indian science, the concentration of research resources exclusively within prestigious institutions, the commodification of knowledge under neoliberal frameworks, aggressive campaigning of rightwing pseudoscience and the detachment of technical decision-

making from democratic oversight—these issues cannot be addressed solely through improved communication. They require major transformations in the production, ownership, and governance of scientific knowledge.

The way forward necessitates building upon KSSP's accomplishments while candidly recognizing its shortcomings. Sen Gupta posits that future endeavors should maintain "internal pluralism" and "external receptivity," which entails the readiness to engage with multiple perspectives and assimilate knowledge from diverse traditions (Mazzonetto 3). Science movements must continue their foundational efforts to disseminate scientific information and advocate for rational thought. They must enhance their analytical sophistication regarding the dynamics of power within scientific institutions, demonstrate creativity in formulating alternative models of knowledge production and application, and adopt strategic approaches to forge alliances with other social movements advocating for democracy and justice.

The core principle behind KSSP's embrace of the phrase "Science for Social Revolution" endures: scientific knowledge can serve as a potent instrument for human liberation, provided it is freed from elite dominance and employed for the benefit of the marginalized. Achieving this vision requires not only enhanced science communication but also a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between science and society—one characterized by permeable boundaries between experts and the general public, research priorities shaped by democratic discourse rather than market forces or bureaucratic inertia, and equitable distribution of the benefits of scientific progress rather than their monopolization by elites. The contemporary task for people's science movements is to articulate and advance this vision with the same inventiveness, tenacity, and political clarity that has defined KSSP's most exemplary efforts over the past six decades.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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