



The Colonial Heritage in Indian Publishing

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THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTION of two hundred years of British colonial rule to Indian publishing is an internal market for books in the English language — a market that persists and even grows despite the end of direct colonial domination in 1947. This has had a profound effect, for good and ill, on the growth of Indian publishing since independence.

On the positive side, India has the advantage of a large body of intellectuals, professionals of all kinds, who are more or less fluent in the dominant language of international communication today — English. Their use of the language is sometimes clumsy, sometimes archaic, often ungrammatical and in an idiom that might sound dated in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia; but, by and large, the language is effectively used by the leading intellectuals of the country. Professionally, they think and function almost entirely in English. Most of them are bilingual.

A result of this continuing domination of English in Indian professional and intellectual life is that approximately 40 percent of the book titles published in India are in English. This situation has tended to persist over the last few years, despite numerous attempts by governmental and nongovernmental agencies to encourage the use of Indian languages for official and academic purposes. It is this historical background that has made India the third largest producer of books in English (in terms of the number of titles published annually) after the United States and Britain, and, potentially at least, a substantial exporter of books and print.

Considered from one angle, Indian publishing presents a picture of considerable advancement in the past twenty-five years: the number of

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publishers of all-India standing has increased from two or three to at least a dozen; professionalism and specialization have received belated recognition; wholesale distribution has established itself, and there are now at least four wholesalers capable of effective nationwide distribution. Oddly enough, Indian bookselling has steadily declined during these years; the large bookstores of the 1930s and early 1940s have either disappeared or deteriorated. Delhi, with its substantial and highly prosperous population of foreign diplomats (as well as numerous foreign tourists and other visitors) and with the highest per capita income of all Indian cities (even for the indigenous population), still seems capable of supporting a few excellent bookshops, but even there the actual performance is disappointing.

The weakness of the situation arises from the fact that, as far as the English language is concerned, this expansion has a very narrow base: only about 2 percent of India's 600 million people — that is, 12 million people — can read English. One might think that this is a sufficiently large number, considering that some countries with one-third this population support substantial publishing industries. But "literacy" in census terms implies no more than an ability to write and decipher individual words; it takes no account of the desire to read, or the ability or willingness to spend a few rupees a month on books or even a newspaper.

If this limitation of growth had been confined to publishing in the English language, the conclusion could have been that this was the result of the declining use of English in Indian education and administration. However, as far as the publishing of "serious" literature (as opposed to "popular" literature) is concerned, the situation is even worse in the case of Indian languages. While the share of Indian languages in the total volume of Indian publishing is probably steadily, though slowly, increasing — and this, by itself, is a satisfactory state of affairs — it is likely that many more Indian-language books fail to reach the legal deposit libraries than English-language books. Thus, a correct evaluation of this trend is possible only if the directions in which expansion is taking place are known.

The case of Hindi, the official language of the Indian Union, may be considered first. It enjoys a number of advantages as a publishing language. In spoken and written variants, it is the language of one-half of India's population, i.e. about 300 million people. Hindi is the language of the great majority of the Indian films, made at the major producing centers in Bombay and Madras, which play to millions all over the country each week. As the official language of the union and of six populous states,

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Hindi has been and is being systematically promoted both for educational and administrative purposes. The Central Hindi Directorate and the six state *granth akademis*, or publication boards, are active in publishing and in promoting and assisting the publication of Hindi books at the university level. Finally, under the 3-language educational policy, Hindi is being studied as a compulsory subject in most of the non-Hindi-speaking states. All this has undoubtedly helped Hindi publishing to grow substantially over the last twenty-five years.

In the Hindi-speaking states, Hindi is now the medium of instruction at the school level in all but a small minority of English-medium schools, where the study of Hindi is also compulsory. With about 30 percent of the population in school, there is an enormous market for textbooks in Hindi. However, this field is largely, and increasingly, outside the scope of operation of commercial publishing — government-financed textbook boards are taking over.

At the college and university levels, the change to Hindi for instruction is virtually complete up to the first-degree level, and is largely so at the graduate level in the humanities and social sciences. Only medicine and engineering still retain the English medium. Enrollments at these levels, particularly in certain subjects, run into the tens of thousands each. This provides a substantial and lucrative field of activity for Hindi publishers, but they have still to exploit it fully.

In spite of the change to the Hindi medium at this level, the English-language textbook is not easily displaced. With earlier generations of teachers having been educated professionally in English, getting books satisfactorily translated into or written in Hindi, especially on scientific and technical subjects, poses a number of problems (including problems of technical terminology). It sometimes happens that even those students educated in the Hindi medium throughout find books in the original English easier to understand than translations.

Another factor inhibiting the healthy growth of Hindi publishing at this level is the fact that recommendations tend to be highly localized, i.e. college teachers recommend their own books or those of their college or city colleagues in a sort of mutual-benefit society. Such books are published by the local bookseller who, with little or no overhead to cover or discount to part with, sets both royalties and prices at levels with which a publisher covering wider horizons cannot afford to compete. Despite these limitations, this is an area of great promise for Hindi publishers. A government takeover at this level is not likely to be attempted in the foreseeable future, in view of the acceptance of the principle of university

and college autonomy. In fact, the individual lecturer or professor is often the only recommending authority for a book. Those central recommending agencies that do exist are less influential than the teachers who are in direct touch with the students.

It is the Hindi paperback that has made the most spectacular progress in the course of the last decade. The pioneer was Dina Nath Malhotra with his Hind Pocket Books, which was founded twenty-five years ago. The paper- or cardbound book has, of course, always been available in India — in all languages, to keep prices down — but with Jaico Publishing House (English) in Bombay and Hind Pocket Books in Delhi, there was a hesitant launch into the true paperback revolution. Both the format and the name of the Delhi series (pocket books) indicate a dominantly American rather than U.K. (Penguin/Pelican) influence. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Home University Series, issued from Bombay, clearly and frankly imitated the Pelican format and uniform covers — even the blue color matched that of the Pelican publications.

Starting with modest print runs of 3000-5000, Hindi paperbacks now have runs of a minimum of 10,000 in the successful houses; runs of up to 30,000 are not unusual and sometimes one will find runs of 60,000. One author of popular romances, Gulshan Nada, enjoys print orders of 100,000. The number of publishers bringing out these paperbacks has regularly increased each year, and at least a dozen of them now operate from Delhi, Agra, Meerut and some other cities in Uttar Pradesh. Amar Nath of Star Publications, Delhi (one of the largest Hindi paperback publishers), estimates that about 100 new Hindi paperbacks are issued each month.¹

Most of the paperback titles issued are light novels — adventure, romance, mystery, with varying doses of sex and violence — the staple fare offered by popular paperbacks everywhere. Some serious literature, both fiction and nonfiction, is also published in smaller editions at higher prices by some of the companies (notably Hind Pocket Books), and it is to be hoped that, as the paperback companies gain stability and confidence, more of them will devote part of their resources to the publishing of serious literature.

Substantial sales of these paperbacks are achieved through single-imprint book clubs, with memberships as high as 10,000; through regular bookshops; and through bookstalls and book barrows on railway stations and pavement kiosks, where they sell along with works by Ian Fleming, Erle Stanley Gardner, James Hadley Chase, Alistair Maclean, Agatha Christie and Barbara Cartland. Additional substantial outlets for these

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books are the small commercial lending libraries that operate in almost all neighborhoods in Indian cities; a few thousand copies of titles by popular authors are delivered upon publication to these libraries alone.

More serious literature, such as literary criticism, academic studies and other serious works of general interest, is still widely published in the conventional way, either in hardcover or paperbound. The market for these is almost exclusively the university, college and public libraries, which combined can barely absorb 1000 copies in most cases, perhaps 1500-2000 in the case of outstanding works—a limitation Hindi publishing shares, in a more severe form, with scholarly publishing in English in India.

General and scholarly publishing in Hindi tends to appear in the fields of literature, literary criticism, language and linguistics, and somewhat less frequently in religion, philosophy and regional history. In other words, the emphasis tends to fall on subjects that have a more or less direct Hindi context. For other subjects, even those scholars capable of presenting scholarly material in Hindi often still prefer to write and publish in English, whether in India or abroad. The object, of course, is to reach as wide a readership as possible, not only internationally but also within the country. Here again English casts its long shadow on Hindi publishing.

At the scholarly level, publication in two languages seems to serve no purpose. Once a monograph has been published in English and efficiently distributed, an Indian-language version commands virtually no additional demand. At that level, almost all interested persons are fully capable of reading and understanding the work in English, and the additional readership obtained by publishing in an Indian language is not sufficient to justify separate publication.

In regard to conventional distribution channels, Hindi publishing, and, as will be reiterated, all Indian-language publishing, is very poorly served. The weaknesses of Indian bookselling in general have already been mentioned; the situation appears to be worse in the case of Indian-language books. In spite of the very wide area and large population requiring Hindi books, the interest of the all-India wholesalers in them is, at best, marginal.

This being the position of Hindi, one cannot expect the situation to be any better in the case of other Indian languages. Persistent traditions lend some strength to literary writing and publishing in languages like Bengali, Marathi and Telugu, but the pattern is the same: school textbooks are largely or wholly nationalized; university-level textbooks

offer possibilities but present difficulties still to be solved; not particularly literary or original novels gain popularity as paperbacks; and books of better quality sell in extremely limited quantities and very slowly.

While book clubs of the type mentioned earlier and other unconventional methods of distribution have been effective in the distribution of popular paperbacks in Indian languages, news agents and newsstands have not yet been exploited to any significant degree for this purpose. This is understandable, since the paperback publishers are not in a position to accept large-scale and early returns of stocks, the expense of which would completely annihilate their already meager margins. The Indian paperback publisher cannot afford more than a 10 percent write-off — and even that is difficult.

Surpassing the circulation of paperbacks in all Indian languages is the circulation of story magazines through news agents and newsstands. The most popular of them offer, as is to be expected, the same kind of fare as the paperbacks, but often spiced with a variety of nonfiction articles and features, special-interest material for women and children, and fascinating advertisements. A popular Tamil (South Indian) magazine regularly serializes novels and later issues them in paperback form, registering advance orders from readers for supply by mail, as well as selling copies through bookshops later. It was this phenomenon that led one Indian publishing editor to describe Indians as a nation of magazine readers rather than of book readers. They certainly buy magazines much more readily than they buy books.

While these popular magazines circulate in quantities of tens of thousands, and the most popular of the Tamil and Malayalam ones have circulations exceeding 100,000 (rivaling Hindi magazines in this respect), print orders for paperbacks in these languages are much lower than in the case of Hindi — 8000-10,000 in more advanced and highly populated areas, and down to 2000-3000 in regions like Karnatak and Orissa. Print orders in the latter range were still economic three years ago, thanks to low labor costs, but since prices of paper and other materials rose steeply in 1974-75, this is no longer so, and print runs have had to be further restricted. In some Indian languages, there are now only books bound in paper and not "paperbacks."

Opinions differ on whether the rather mild paperback revolution which India is now experiencing is a good thing, considering the quality of the bulk of the material published. As Romesh Thapar, an acute observer of the book situation in South Asia and elsewhere, puts it:

The normal sequence of transition is disrupted. Television can

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come before the radio, the radio before the school or college and the newspaper before the book. There is a great hunger for knowledge — knowledge to understand the change taking place and for knowledge to prevent the growth of a new illiteracy. The availability of pertinent reading materials is already considered the key to equality, but the resource is limited because all manner of trash seeks easily to satisfy the hunger of the new literates.²

Thapar further states that “the newspaper, the magazine, the comic, the romance, the detective story dominate the scene at the moment.”³

The problem of the role of the book as an agent for, or instrument of, development is one that has received considerable attention in governmental and educational circles in India. The National Book Trust (an autonomous body fully financed by the Indian Ministry of Education) was set up with the objectives of fostering “bookmindedness” and publishing, particularly of good literature in Indian languages at affordable prices. A National Book Development Board was also set up by the Ministry of Education in 1967 to advise the government on matters concerning the book-publishing industry in all its aspects and interconnections (paper, printing and other related industries were also represented on the board). The board has been inactive for some time, and is currently being reorganized. At the government level, there is a Book Development Division in the Ministry of Education. The *Sahitya Akademis* (academies of literature) in the states have already been mentioned; there is also a national Sahitya Akademi. Government-run or government-sponsored publication boards have also been active in Indian languages in a number of states. Although these efforts have been substantial and much good work has been done, the results achieved (particularly as far as the regional languages are concerned) have been disappointingly limited. As often happens in such situations, the strongest units have been able to take maximum advantage of government’s efforts. This amounts to saying that the greatest beneficiaries have been the major all-India publishers in English.

The National Book Trust has organized eight National Book Fairs and two World Book Fairs; representation of Indian-language publishers has been poor in all of them. At the second World Book Fair in Delhi in January 1976, there was an improved representation of Hindi and — thanks to state government subsidies plus substantial local initiative — Bengali publishers. At this fair, only about 40 of the 200 participants displayed Indian-language books, and these were mostly along with books in English. At the eighth National Book Fair in Ahmedabad (Gujarat)

in 1977, there was very substantial participation for the first time by Gujarati publishers, but very little by publishers in other Indian languages. Forty of the 100 participants at the Ahmedabad fair displayed Gujarati books or displayed them along with English-language publications. Hindi was hardly represented, however, and participation by neighboring Marathi publishers was totally absent.

This situation could, of course, be attributed to the fact that "except in the literary field, potential authors are largely expressing themselves in the language of their former colonial masters,"⁴ and that, since works in regional languages do not command an all-India market, there is no point displaying them at national fairs — except those of the region in which the particular fair is being held. As mentioned earlier, however, publishers in the languages of the regions in which the fairs have been held have been very poorly represented (except at the eighth National Book Fair at Ahmedabad).

The pattern is no different in the case of fairs organized on a local scale in major metropolitan centers by the industry and trade organizations. For example, the Publishers Guild of Calcutta organized a very successful book fair held in March 1976. In spite of the fact that Bengali publishing is much stronger and better patronized than publishing in most other Indian languages, only about twenty of fifty-four participants displayed and sold Bengali books, many along with English books. The rest offered virtually only English books, and the large all-India publishing and distribution units were dominant.

The same pattern was repeated in October 1976 in Delhi in a fair organized by the Delhi State Publishers and Booksellers Association in celebration of its silver jubilee. Few stalls carried Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu books, and those that did had very little success with them. At the National Book Trust stall at this fair, only 210 copies (3 in Punjabi, the rest in Hindi) of books in these languages were sold, compared to 851 copies of books in English. Had the fair been located within the walls of the old city (rather than in New Delhi), with its cosmopolitan but still dominantly Hindi/Punjabi-speaking population, things would have been different. The significant point is that the New Delhi location was considered best. In November 1976, the same pattern was repeated in Bombay; the local fair was organized in the Fort (downtown) area, again dominantly cosmopolitan and with scarcely a bookshop selling books in Marathi, Gujarati or Hindi — except texts in these languages prescribed for use in schools.

The experience of the subsidy scheme operated by the National Book

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Trust under the Indo-U.S. Textbook Program, with funds provided by U.S. AID from P.L. 480, points in a similar direction. Under this scheme, funds were available to assist publication of such works in Indian languages (including translations and adaptations of U.S. works), in addition to original Indian works in English in the fields of science and technology at the university level. In the first phase of the scheme, during which government-financed publishing organizations were not entitled to receive assistance, only two of the forty-nine titles assisted were in Hindi; no other Indian languages were represented. In the second phase (October 1974-December 1976), during which the scheme was thrown open to government publishing organizations, 134 of the 298 titles issued were in Indian languages (112 in Hindi and 22 in other languages); of these, only 8 were issued by the private sector, and all were in Hindi. All the rest were published by state *akademis*, publishing boards and some university units. This is not because there were many books submitted by the private sector which were not approved for assistance, but rather because very few publishers sought the assistance available. They were apparently simply not interested in handling such nonremunerative projects, and even the substantial subsidies did not induce them to experiment with such material. These publishers were quite content to leave this activity to the public sector.

In view of the difficulties faced by commercial publishing houses in publishing Indian-language serious literature (fiction and nonfiction) for the layperson on any substantial scale, the National Book Trust was also required to publish and distribute such literature in Indian languages at prices people could afford. Initially, the trust acquired translation rights for a number of outstanding international titles and outstanding Indian works, and had the works translated into various Indian languages. These translations were offered to publishers for publication on royalty terms. The results were disappointing; there were very few takers and the scheme was abandoned.

Presumably in view of its experience with the translations, the trust depended — except in one series — mainly on commissioned works providing information on subjects of Indian interest for its own publishing program. These were mostly written in English and later translated into Indian languages. In the Aadan-Pradan (“Give and Take”) series, literary works in each of twelve Indian languages (excluding English) have been translated and published in the other eleven languages.

There has been much criticism in the Indian parliament and press about the failure of the trust to distribute its publications adequately —

about accumulating unsold stock. Whether this criticism is justified and to what extent will not be dealt with here. Attention should be drawn to the fact that this attempt by the public sector to sell serious books in Indian languages at subsidized prices has encountered the same difficulties as those faced by commercial publishers: limited markets and woefully inadequate distribution facilities.

It is the writer's personal experience in attempting to improve sales of National Book Trust publications that it is easiest to expand sales of English and Hindi titles; of the two, the former easier than the latter. Hindi has, among others, the advantage of catering to one-half India's population, but while it is well ahead of other Indian languages, Hindi still lags behind English in effective demand for nonfiction and serious fiction.

It has been a comparatively simple matter to find reliable wholesalers and stockers in various parts of the country to handle the trust's English-language titles; to find outlets for books in Indian languages has often been difficult, even in cities and towns where the language is spoken. For example, some large distributors in the south are willing to handle the trust's English titles, but are reluctant to handle those in South Indian languages.

The simple fact seems to be that book distribution and bookselling in English are more profitable than in Indian languages. Very few major booksellers carry stocks of Indian-language books; the few that do give them only second-class display and attention. In the major cities, most of the best booksellers are located in cosmopolitan areas and deal almost exclusively in English-language books, and often dominantly in imported books. As one moves to the district towns, the attention paid to Indian-language books improves, but this is in a context of decreasing efficiency of service and of meager stocks. Going further, to the smaller urban centers, the position becomes increasingly hopeless — only textbooks are sold, and even these are not easily available for college and university courses. The position in Karnataka (formerly Mysore) was described by a leading distributor of Kannada books: "There aren't even a dozen 'General Booksellers' who evince any interest in stocking books even against very liberal terms and other facilities offered by publishers. Perhaps it will take a decade or more from the Kannada bookselling business . . . to become an organized affair."⁵

It is this weakness in distribution that is preventing Indian publishing from keeping pace with the growing market which the spread of education should provide, combined with high costs of both production

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and distribution. An efficient network of general booksellers cannot survive without enjoying a substantial rate of discount on purchases from publishers and wholesalers; they also require at least some limited return privileges. Neither of these is within the means of most publishers of Indian-language books if, in a situation of rising costs, prices must remain at acceptable levels. Direct supply to consumers through book clubs or by mail has become increasingly expensive, although some concessions on postal registration charges and value-payable post (collection of cost plus postal charges upon delivery) have been granted for parcels valued at Rs 10/- (\$1.25) or less.

In this difficult situation, in which sales at even heavily subsidized prices are hard to get and profits or breaking even are unthinkable, the public sector must participate — even if only to blunder in and attempt to muddle through. For a long time to come, publishing of serious literature in Indian languages will have to be strongly encouraged and supported. The public sector units, notably the National Book Trust and the Publications Division of the Indian government, must also contribute to the development of an efficient distribution system — conventional, unconventional, or a combination of the two.

The private and cooperative sectors have been attempting to tackle the problem of distribution, and there have been some notable achievements. These achievements have in common the partial elimination or bypassing of the middleman, the independent bookseller — a trend which can only cause concern. In the majority of cases, however, it is generally not a question of eliminating or bypassing, but rather a case of providing a service where none is available. The appetite will grow with feeding, and the demand for books in bookshops will grow with the development of unconventional book distribution methods. Book clubs and mail-order houses have supplemented rather than displaced bookshops in the west. No other form of book distribution, however, can match the services of a good bookshop.

The book clubs and home library clubs are based on advance commitments to purchase, and often require advance payment. Members get regular editions (special club editions are not issued) at much less than list price and often post-free, but pay substantially more than the trade price. The Hindi paperback clubs have already been mentioned. The Home Library Plan (EMESCO Books), organized by M. Seshachalam and Co. through the Andhra Pradesh Book Distributors (both headed by M.N. Rao, a pioneer in this mode of distribution), also merits mention. The language in this case is Telugu.

The Sahitya Pravartaka Cooperative Society in Kerala is essentially a cooperative of Malayalam writers who publish their own and other Malayalam books, paying member-authors royalties of 30 percent of list price. The cooperative, now just over twenty-five years old and publishing an average of one book per day, offers a fascinating study of both its positive and negative features, but the point to be noted here is that the cooperative also runs a powerful chain (a near-monopoly) of bookshops all over Kerala known as the National Book Stalls. Through these outlets and mailings to numerous Malayalis scattered throughout India (and the world), the cooperative has succeeded in substantially increasing the amount and speed of circulation. The society has received considerable support and patronage from the government of Kerala. Attempts to develop in a similar direction by a cooperative of Tamil writers have not met with much success, and the good work done by the Southern Languages Book Trust ten years ago has largely been dissipated with the withdrawal of supporting institutional funds.

A small-scale operation with large-scale potential that needs to be better known is that of the Lok-Milap ("Meeting of Peoples") Trust which operates in the Gujarati language from a comparatively small district town in northern Gujarat. Since 1973 this nonprofit organization has been issuing annual sets of three to five paperback or hardcover volumes of serious literature — novels, collections of short stories or poems, biographies, essays and (in 1976) a set of illustrated books for children — and making them available at very little above the cost of production and freight to groups of persons who subscribe in advance; commercial publishers would normally price the same books at about four times the cost. This has resulted in series sales of 10,000-15,000 copies, 80 percent of which are subscribed some four months before publication and the rest sold through normal trade channels at double the subscription price during the following one or two years. Actually, a number of booksellers subscribe for multiple sets and hold them for sale after the publication date, which in effect gives them these supplies at a 50 percent discount, compared to the 25 percent discount offered to the trade after publication. The trade prices of these publications are thus still about one-half normal commercial price.

The sales of these series are in striking contrast to the average editions of 1000 copies sold over a period of 4 years for serious books in Gujarati — a language spoken by 30 million people, about one-third of whom are literate. The large print runs naturally lead to lower unit costs, which further help to reduce prices. As Mahendra Meghani, Lok-Milap

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Managing Trustee, puts it, the trust "has eliminated both the publisher and the bookseller,"⁶ whose main roles have been taken over by the readers (buyers). They provide the capital four months in advance; they group together to place the minimum acceptable orders of ten sets of each series, the coordinator of each group being permitted to retain 5 percent to cover costs. Lok-Milap retains an additional 3 percent, 10 percent goes to the authors as royalty, and about 82 percent is paid as an advance to the printers and binders, which encourages them to quote favorable rates.

While the results of these and other similar efforts — commercial and noncommercial — are encouraging and demonstrate that there is a substantial untapped potential, they also show that, even for commercial success, the conventional commercial approach is inadequate. For some time to come at least, non-profit-making social service organizations will also have an important role to play; until the purchasing power of the people rises substantially, the need for subsidized book publication will remain. The development of book marketing must also be effectively tackled.

English-language publishing will and must continue to grow in India. In addition to being virtually one more Indian language, it is also for Indians a "special-use" language. At the highest levels of specialization, its use will continue and grow, as will its use as a literary language and a language of all-India communication, in addition to the developing role of Hindi for this purpose.

English-language publishing in India has enough difficulties and is in constant need of support and encouragement; what needs to be realized is that the problems of Indian-language publishers are much more numerous and difficult. Consequently, they require assistance and encouragement on a much larger scale than do English-language publishers, if they are not all to lapse — if they are to survive at all — into publication of ephemera, to the virtual exclusion of material of lasting interest.

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