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## The right to research

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This paper argues that research be recognised as a right of a special kind – that it be regarded as a more universal and elementary ability. It suggests that research is a specialised name for a generalised capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet. I maintain that knowledge is both more valuable and more ephemeral due to globalisation, and that it is vital for the exercise of informed citizenship. I acknowledge the 30% of the total world population in poorer countries who may get past elementary education to the bottom rung of secondary and post-secondary education, and state that one of the rights that this group ought to claim is the right to research – to gain strategic knowledge – as this is essential to their claims for democratic citizenship. I then explore the democratisation of the right to research, and the nexus between research and action, using the Mumbai-based Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research (PUKAR) as an example.

**Keywords:** *Research; Human Rights; Citizenship; Globalisation; Knowledge; PUKAR*

### The argument

Research is normally seen as a high-end, technical activity, available by training and class background to specialists in education, the sciences and related professional fields. It is rarely seen as a capacity with democratic potential, much less as belonging to the family of rights. In this paper, I will argue that it is worth regarding research as a right, albeit of a special kind. This argument requires us to recognise that research is a specialised name for a generalised capacity, the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet. All human beings are, in this sense, researchers, since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons.

This is especially so in a world of rapid change, where markets, media, and migration have destabilised secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary or local

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sources. Further, as the institutions and values of democracy sweep the world, knowledge (both abstract and empirical) is the coin of the realm, and the capacity to distinguish knowledge from rumor, fact from fiction, propaganda from news, and anecdote from trend, is vital for the exercise of informed citizenship.

Globalisation makes knowledge—of whatever type—simultaneously more valuable and more ephemeral. Thus, thinkers like Robert Reich recognised the importance of knowledge-workers, and many industrial societies are constructing policies for life-long training and education as essential tools for economic survival for nations and economic security for individuals. In this environment, the bulk of the world's ordinary people find themselves in one of three categories. The lower 50% are not even in the knowledge game, because they are starving, dispossessed or economically marginal. Another category, perhaps another 30% of the world's population, have the means and wish to expand their horizons and improve their lives, but they are often pushed into degree factories of one type or another and rapidly channeled into professional or vocational fields where they may get jobs, but rarely get the chance to change jobs, much less to change careers. The top 20% (arguably) have the privilege of choosing among career options, examining their options critically, establishing educational preferences, placing bets on different knowledge paths, and changing careers as a consequence of their capacity to benefit from high-end knowledge about knowledge. Such meta-knowledge is the true mark of the global elite.

My argument is addressed to the bottom portion of the upper half of the typical population in poorer countries, the 30% or so of the total population who have a shot at getting past elementary education to the bottom rungs of secondary and post-secondary education. This group (which consists of perhaps 1.5 billion people in the world today) is within the framework of global knowledge societies. But their existence in this category is insecure, for many reasons, including partial education, inadequate social capital, poor connectivity political weakness and economic insecurity. I would suggest that among the rights that this group is capable of claiming—and ought to claim—is the right to research. By this I mean the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens.

This rights-based definition of research is hardly conventional. My reasons for proposing it as a starting point for this paper are partly substantive and partly rhetorical. The *substantive* part is based on the view that full citizenship today requires the capacity to make strategic inquiries—and gain strategic knowledge—on a continuous basis. Knowledge of AIDS, knowledge of riots, knowledge of labor market shifts, knowledge of migration paths, knowledge of prisons, knowledge of law, all these are now critical to the exercise of citizenship or the pursuit of it for those who are not full citizens. The *rhetorical* reason for viewing research in a rights-based perspective is to force us to take some distance from the normal, professionalised view of research, and derive some benefit from regarding research as a much more universal, elementary and improvable capacity. This argument establishes the need to de-parochialise the idea of research.

### **Deparochialising research**

The idea of research is commonly regarded as the epitome of a context-free, cosmopolitan, abstract activity. Thus it is usually viewed as an antidote to parochialism. I now lay the basis for regarding it differently, for seeing it as parochial in key ways, and for opening it up as a genuinely inclusive and universally available capacity. This requires three sets of observations, questions, and arguments. The first is an afterthought or starting point on the paper on grassroots globalisation and the research imagination (Appadurai, 2000). The second is a set of ideas about human rights and global flows. The third has to do with the grassroots globalisation and is drawn from work I am engaged in, in Mumbai, with my colleagues in an organisation devoted to action-oriented research. This last portion is a sort of ethnography of practice.

Let me begin first with a reflection on the paper, 'Grassroots globalization and the research imagination.' I am still very much engaged with, and committed to the questions which I raised in that paper. I began with a realisation that the very idea of research is not, or has not been sufficiently reflected on, though many adjacent subjects, such as the history of scientific inquiry, the history of the university, the history of education as a field or even sub-practices within it, and of course the history of teaching, have been the subject of much discussion. But these topics surrounded the idea of research, on which there was little critical reflection. My conclusion was that research was so much a part of the natural vocabulary of contemporary critical thought that there was no distance, or insufficient distance from it. Research is so vital to our academic common sense that it is not a surprise that there is not a lot of direct reflection on it. I remain deeply interested in what research is, and how research as an idea has evolved in the west, what its meanings are, what people think they are doing when they say they are 'doing research' or when they are teaching others to do research. And how do people who are entering the world of research, from outside its western historical home, try to do so? What are the conditions of entry to that world? Why is it so hard to teach people how to 'do' research, or what a good research proposal is? Why do some research proposals seem weak, or even if they seem strong, why do they later not work, or not seem to produce some significant result? Depending on whether it is in the empirical sciences—social or natural—or in the humanities fields, there is much still to be said about the peculiarity of the activity itself. I continue to be interested in thinking about why research is a strange activity, and above where its strangeness lies, and I hope to build on the observation that its fundamental mystery is that it purports to be a systematic means for discovering the not-yet-known. How can you have a systematic means for getting to what you do not know? For example, what you do not know might be so profoundly unsystematic that systematically getting to it is logically impossible. Or it may be that your systematic way is not suited to the most important object that you do not know but ought to be thinking about. So there remains a paradox deep inside the idea of research, and this paradox might explain why it is such a hot-house activity.

I have also become interested in how one teaches about research. If one accepts that there is some element of mystery, paradox and strangeness about research, how

is one going to teach it as part of a pedagogic activity which can be seen also as adjacent to research, as in 'research and teaching.' Later, in my Mumbai example, I will attempt to flesh out the question, 'What does it mean to engage in a pedagogy about research?' in a context where lots of people have no familiarity with that world, and where others (within the university system) who do, are by the standard criteria, not doing so well. For example, sociology, which used to be a very strong field in Mumbai, is today a weak field by conventional standards. Again, one might question the standards, but by normal standards, the university system in Mumbai would not be considered a healthy system in the sense in which it was 20 years ago, 50 years ago or 150 years ago when it first began. And like many other parts of the world, Mumbai's strengths are now in engineering, due to the strong presence of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), which is part of a national group of schools, and also in architecture, in design, in business, and, of course in computer programming of every variety. But the classical university system which issues BAs MAs, Ph.Ds in all the standard fields of humanities, and the social and life sciences, is in poor shape. I will return to the relation of pedagogy to research itself—teaching people to be researchers, as opposed to pedagogy as a whole.

Let me turn to the second part of the paper, which is about globalisation. Needless to say, that is a very fast moving object, and my earlier paper was written almost five years ago. Many things have happened since then, not least 9/11, its aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq, a whole series of major natural disasters in many parts of the world—the tsunami, the floods in Mumbai, New Orleans, the earthquake in Pakistan, to name just four. The continuing reality is that globalisation as a new phase or new moment in the history and mobility of capital continues to produce all sorts of irregularities in the tectonics of political and social life. In one sense nothing has changed after September 11, 2001: the nation state is certainly only one among many other players, though it is evidently neither dying nor dead. There are many kinds of sovereignty, popular and transnational, surrounding the claims of the nation state. Some are progressive, others are criminal, some are separatist, others universalist. Also, citizenship is, now more than ever, a complex field and most national polities are occupied in part by people who are not full citizens, but are partial or marginal citizens. This is of course the political story in Europe today. I gather that it is not entirely untrue of Australia, where the crisis of multiculturalism is significant and massive, and in the US as well. So citizenship in a world of migrants is becoming even more sharply a crisis, and this crisis, like many others, has a long history.

Whenever people move they unsettle their new places, partly because migrants often become undocumented partial or incomplete citizens. But at the same time, since about 1950, but especially in the last 20 years, an equally vigorous flow of the discourse of human rights has become institutionalised. Consequently, the older experiences of migrants who just turned up somewhere and hoped for the best are no longer the operative condition. Now most people claim rights of some kind, especially in democratic polities, and only few polities do not claim to be democratic in some way. Take the People's Republic of China, for example. We may argue that it is not democratic in the same way as the US or India, but the People's Republic of China

does not see itself as undemocratic. The question is what kind of democracy is it? In the People's Republic of China, the state does not claim that minorities are trivial. It has a position on minorities, which recognises them as different without granting any political significance whatsoever to this difference. Thus this case becomes a crisis for the regnant global ideology of human rights.

### **The crisis of rights**

There is a broad and growing literature on the relationship of human rights (conceived as pertaining to freedom, justice and equality of some sort) to economic rights of many kinds. A parallel discussion in political theory seeks to connect problems of dignity and recognition to discussions of equity and redistribution. These debates grow out of a broader historical context in which the vocabulary and institutions of human rights were formalised as universal values and policy aims after the formation of the United Nations in the middle of the twentieth century. The spread of the values and assumptions of human rights thinking is arguably one of the fastest instances of the globalisation of a social ideology. Today, although there is strenuous resistance among various states to particular interpretations of human rights, and of their records in regard to human rights, very few states or political elites openly eschew or dismiss the principle of human rights as such. This is a revolution in consciousness, which has been accompanied by many specific initiatives and dramas at an institutional and personal level. These initiatives often involve previously marginal or invisible harms, such as those affecting children, refugees, guest-workers, as well as citizens of different kinds.

The problem with this worldwide ascendancy of the ideology of human rights is that it occurs at the same time as a series of other sweeping changes, some of which also seem to be crises, in the life of national economies, societies and cultures. As a consequence, there is pressure on human rights laws, courts, and advocates to solve problems of human rights on a larger scale and on a more volatile canvas than at any prior moment in human history. There is a paradox here, since some of these crises of equity, citizenship and justice are produced by the increased acceptance and endorsement of the idea of human rights itself. Others have independent origins but come to roost in the sites where the values of human rights take national, legal, and political shape. In both cases, the language of human rights is asked to stretch itself beyond elementary and abstract freedoms to include more subtle and material ones. To understand this process, we need a brief survey of the broader turbulence produced by the process of globalisation.

Some crises are produced by the rapid, irregular movement of capital as, for example, produced the famous 'Asian crisis' of a few years ago, and are not gone by any means. The divorce of finance capital from other kinds of capital, its rapid movement in forms that are very poorly understood—derivatives and the like—continues with full force. This movement has produced, worldwide, a deep tension between economic sovereignty, at the locus of the nation state, and cultural sovereignty. I believe that this is the source of a lot of large-scale violence, state violence, as well as other kinds

of violence. Few nation states, including the wealthiest, can claim real economic sovereignty, which is a very important basis of the classical nation state. Take the US for example. It is common knowledge that the US consumer economy is financially in hock to mainland China. In broader economic terms the US is intimately linked with Chinese money, Chinese trade, Chinese goods and so on. Here is the world's largest and most powerful economy, but it is hardly in control of its own destiny, and of course, smaller economies face the same predicament. This tension produces, both a certain amount of international, that is, state to state conflict, but it also produces a large amount of intranational, or within-state, conflict, especially about minorities or groups who are perceived to be minor, numerically or otherwise (Appadurai, 2006). These conflicts are frequently articulated as human rights struggles.

The lag between globalisation and the knowledge of globalisation is more acute than ever before. For example, in India there is a very vigorous privatisation of education, in every sphere, and aggressive overseas players, notably from Australia, but also from the UK, Canada, and to some extent from the US, are increasingly involved with the Indian educational market. But now the state is waking up, and paying very close regulatory attention, and is beginning to create elaborate procedures for what are called foreign educational providers, which cannot be ignored by these actors except at the risk of being in non-compliance with the law. India, for all the serious talk about deregulation, privatisation, and the open market, is a state-saturated society. The state has recently realised that a significant part of its control over education is being lost, both to private operators inside who have no outside partners, and to educational entrepreneurs from the outside. The field of education shows its own version of the new tensions between state sovereignty and the play of the market. The market encourages collaboration, acquisition, mergers and so on to catch the growing demand (largely located in the 30% population segment I discussed earlier) for various new sorts of degrees, diplomas, certificates for some vocational purpose. Many of these new credentials are about success in a globalised world, and many involve some association with an overseas institution.

The field of art and design, in India, is currently being vigorously explored by non-Indian educational ventures. Some of the most aggressive players in the Indian design education market are barely certified or legitimate in their home countries. They are often completely new players. What we see here is a growing diploma market in countries with large populations whose members aspire to 'global' certification, and a struggle by recognised universities and their home states to find the right blend of protection and market exploitation. In both India and China, there is a burgeoning field of educational activities which involve major overseas collaborations sanctioned by the official state and university system on the one hand (Harvard, Yale and Columbia, for example, are among at least 50 major American universities with major collaborative agreements in India and China); and a much more seamy bottom end, where barely qualified entrepreneurs, both indigenous and foreign, peddle dubious degrees to the more desperate and the less discriminating. This transformation of the educational sphere complicates the broader traditional history of student traffic between countries (as measured in 'international' students in various countries, for example).

The point about this messy space of global educational entrepreneurship, for the purposes of this paper, is that it reveals that the process of globalisation forces states and professional educators to open their markets, offer new kinds of certification, and engage in new forms of market regulation, because the capacity to produce globally useful knowledge is not evenly distributed.

This gap is where 'the right to research' can become important. These new educational degrees and institutions are rarely concerned with research. More importantly, they rely on two major distinctions. They thrive on the distinction between teaching and training, and on the distinction between training and research. Thus, they have two effects. The first is to deepen the gap between vocational training and the capacity of the individual to make independent inquiries about their own lives and worlds. The second is to confine research increasingly to high-end inquiries in a handful of capital intensive settings (usually connected to the natural sciences and technology), while the bulk of the citizenry is pushed into the credentialing machines (if they are in the lucky upper half of their societies which have made it to the post-secondary level).

### **Democratising the right to research: an example from India**

What about research which is not confined to the university or the professional elites, but which can be part of the lives of ordinary people? Here I move to a more personal mode, which is nevertheless not just anecdotal.

About 10 years ago, sometime before I began to think about grassroots globalisation, I decided to do research on Mumbai, which is the city in which I had grown up, on which I had done very little research before. I began with an interest in ethnic violence—violence against Muslims in the early 1990s—which quickly expanded to include subjects as such housing, crime, cinema and other subjects which could not easily be isolated from the issue of collective violence. I also began to see that the official university system was close to bankrupt; the main older Mumbai universities and colleges were, at best, official degree factories where good faculty were often demoralised, coffers were empty, and people were often not getting paid on time. This seemed strange for a university that was well established in India, a country where universities have been very well established for a long time. So I began to think—especially in connection to my own research on grassroots activism in relation to housing (Appadurai, 2002) that I should make an intervention in Mumbai, designed to bring together youth and globalisation in a forum for cross-disciplinary debate oriented to extend beyond the upper middle-classes of the city. With neither official support nor private backing, and just a small amount of my own research monies, my spouse and colleague Carol A. Breckenridge and a few other people I knew in India, we created a small organisation called PUKAR, which in Hindi means 'to call', and is also an acronym for Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research. PUKAR is very young, about four-years-old, and is registered as a charitable trust, which is the equivalent of a non-profit organisation in the US. It involves bringing together what we call 'early career researchers'—people in their early thirties—but also many people who are not officially researchers—architects, journalists—people who are in the



knowledge business but are not in the degree business, and some who are teachers, sociologists and others. PUKAR also has an older generation of advisors, people who have no stake in it other than to mentor others, who come from journalism, business, film, etc—not just from the university. The idea was to place knowledge and action, specifically creative action, artistic action, political action, in some common framework and to do so with an eye to a number of ambitious goals for any place, but certainly for Mumbai. One goal was to insist that research and action in what we would call the arts, humanities, film, media, should not be separate from research on the economy, infrastructure, and planning. The second aim was to have a local constituency but to recognise that Mumbai, like many other cities, is embedded in global processes, and thus to develop a cadre of younger people, who were not only academics, but who shared an interest in the city's future, and in locating the city in the world. Today this particular aim is the active principle behind a major PUKAR initiative called the Youth Fellowship Project, named for its funders, The Sir Ratan Tata Trust, one of India's most distinguished philanthropies. The SRTT Project currently employs about two dozen Senior Fellows, each of whom trains between 10 and 15 Junior Fellows in the techniques of documentation discussed below.

PUKAR (on which more information is available at [www.pukar.org.in](http://www.pukar.org.in)), is still fragile because it is not connected to any larger organisation, to the state, to the university system or even to any big NGO or civil society entity. It is funded from small charitable contributions and a few major grants. The distinctive ambition of PUKAR is to find a space in which English speakers—younger English speakers of college age, and their counterparts who are more comfortable in such languages as Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati among others, can enter a common dialogue about the city, themselves, and the future.

My honorary relationship to PUKAR is as President of the Board of Trustees. In Mumbai, we have a director, a small staff, and a group of what we call associates—people who actually do funded research, who collaborate with other institutions in India and abroad—and a group of advisors who help to keep us alert about the larger environment. Our Board of Trustees helps make policies, runs our budgets, and assures that we are in full compliance with the law in all our activities.

### **Documentation as intervention**

The organising slogan (and signature) of PUKAR is the principle that 'documentation is intervention'. PUKAR owes this idea to one of our younger associates, Rahul Srivastava, who was teaching as a lecturer in Wilson College in Mumbai before he came to PUKAR. Rahul had developed a quite brilliant and unique technique for teaching non-English speakers, or people who had come to English pretty late, who were not from the upper classes, about urban sociology in a manner which drew on their own knowledge and lives. He established a set of techniques whereby he got them to write essays about their buildings, their streets, and their families. He then encouraged them to take photographs of those things they knew about, and then films in some cases, and envision more public forms of debate and communication. The

idea was to produce a document about their world in the city, because they were all people who felt uncertain about how they belonged in the city, while they are actually crucial to it. Yet they felt as though they were outside the city, outside to some other, more powerful, more urbane, more Anglophone citizen. This technique which has subsequently been adopted by many other groups and organisations concerned with college age youth, took the name of The Neighbourhood Project under Rahul Srivastava, who served as Director of PUKAR for three years (from 2002–2005).

In the last few years, the PUKAR community, its members, its leaders, its partners and its supporters have begun to evolve a better understanding of the relationship between the value of documentation as intervention, of grassroots globalisation and of the importance of bringing the capacity to research within the reach of ordinary citizens, especially college-age youth. In this process, we have scaled up our efforts to bring training to larger groups of teachers and students, through the principle of 'documentation as intervention.' We have also begun to clarify ways of teaching young people, often with humble educational backgrounds, the best ways to use documentation as a pathway into gathering information, entering official archives, doing certain forms of systematic analysis, and disseminating their results in speech, writing and other media to various urban audiences. As we have scaled up and refined our projects, we have also had deeper confirmation of the potential of this approach to increasing the motivation of young people to approach their city and their lives as objects of study, and as contexts susceptible to change. And, finally, these experiments in documentation have opened a double path for many young people; one is a deepening of skills they desperately need; the other is the recognition that developing the capacity to document, to inquire, to analyze and to communicate results has a powerful effect on their capacity to speak up as active citizens on matters that are shaping their city and their world.

Finally, as a knowledge-based organisation in a complex urban environment, we are gradually discovering that our commitment to expanding the reach of the idea of research is a truly distinctive way in which we can add value to the work of other organisations concerned with even more urgent material issues, such as housing, mortality, sanitation and safety. Citizens' groups concerned with these other topics frequently need the capacity for research and documentation, but too often they are forced to buy this capacity at high cost or accept external studies and assessments which they cannot easily contest or replace. The detailed story of these experiments and partnerships in the Mumbai context will be told in other reports and studies that are being done by the PUKAR team.

### **Why the right to research?**

The brief way to firm up the argument of this paper is to reconnect the steps that link knowledge, globalisation, citizenship and research. The world in which we live is characterised by a growing gap between the globalisation of knowledge and the knowledge of globalisation. This gap is reflected in the rush for vocational credentials, the struggle to get job-related credentials, the growth in educational mergers, ventures

and collaborations world-wide, and the parallel decline in traditional university settings for teaching, research and higher education. This gap is most noticeable in the social sciences and humanities, and less so in the professional and technological fields where teaching and training are virtually indistinguishable, and research is completely separated as a high-end laboratory-style activity. At the same time, even for modest jobs, businesses or careers of any kind, young people are faced with questions that transcend their own local experiences and are permeated by global forces and factors: call centers, specialised production techniques, new methods of borrowing and investing money, and new technologies for organising information and expressing opinion, all make it hard for people with strictly local knowledge to improve their circumstances. In a word, while knowledge of the world is increasingly important for everybody (from tourist guides to pharmaceutical researchers), the opportunities for gaining such knowledge are shrinking.

This is why it is important to deparochialise the idea of research and make it more widely available to young people with a wide range of interests and aspirations. Research, in this sense, is not only the production of original ideas and new knowledge (as it is normally defined in academia and other knowledge-based institutions). It is also something simpler and deeper. It is the capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one's current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal or aspiration. A Mumbai journalist trying to find out about an earthquake in a nearby town, a hotel manager seeking to make better use of the internet to facilitate bookings, a patient checking to see whether his or her medication is the cheapest or best one available for their condition, a student seeking to know whether a certain school or college is best for him or her, a family trying to find out whether a certain bank is the best one for the type of loan they need, an architect or designer trying to learn where the best possible materials for their project may be available. All these are examples of citizens who need to understand where the best information is available, how much information is enough for a sound decision, where such information is stored, and who might help them to extract what is most significant about it. This is research as a part of everyday life in the contemporary world.

PUKAR's commitment to college age youth in Mumbai, and to the doctrine of *documentation as intervention* seeks to open the door to this wider conception of research. It is one way in which young people who are entering a world of rapid change, new technologies and volatile job markets can develop the triple capacity to inquire, to analyze and to communicate. Research, in this sense, is an essential capacity for democratic citizenship.

The capacity to do research, in this broad sense, is also tied to what I have recently called 'the capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004), the social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals. The uneven distribution of this capacity is both a symptom and a measure of poverty, and it is a form of maldistribution that can be changed by policy and politics. In the current context, I can only suggest that the capacity to aspire and the right to research are necessarily and intimately connected. Without aspiration, there is no pressure to know more. And without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates

into fantasy or despair. Thus, asserting the relevance of the right to research, as a human right, is not a metaphor. It is an argument for how we might revive an old idea, namely, that taking part in democratic society requires one to be informed. One can hardly be informed unless one has some ability to conduct research, however humble the question or however quotidian its inspiration. This is doubly true in world where rapid change, new technologies and rapid flows of information change the playing field for ordinary citizens every day of the week.

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### Notes on contributor

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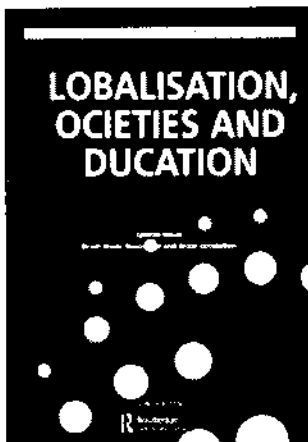
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