A Study of Children's Participation in Small-Scale Indian Family Businesses in Coventry, Britain

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INTRODUCTION

The role of children in family enterprises has gained much wider currency in recent years in academic and political arenas. Children are being increasingly viewed as more than mere passive recipients in the proceeds of family businesses. This has mainly taken the form of recognizing children's abilities in complementing family inputs in significant ways, especially in the ways in which it impacts upon adults' roles and interests in various spheres of life. Research (e.g. White and Brinkerhoff, 1981; Zelizer, 1985; Goodnow and Delaney, 1989) during the 1990s focused more on patterns of handling work roles by children within the family. However, the part played by children in the family businesses has received little attention. In particular, little is known about children's personal perspectives on their contributions to their family businesses. There have been investigations about children as consumers in family finances/economies, whether as cost factors or as victims of poverty. However, the purpose of this paper is to deviate from this norm and engage in an exploratory study of children's expressions about their involvement in the management of their family businesses as well as on their understanding of the notions of 'work' and 'business'.

THE CONTEXT

The industrial revolution in 19th and 20th centuries in Britain initiated vital changes not only in the economic relationships but also in the social set-up of children. Economic stress drove children to factories and work places away from home. When the hazards of the work-place where children had to work impinged upon the consciousness of the reformists and philanthropists they were taken away from the labour market. As a backlash the need for their education and development received prominence and family and school were regarded as safe areas for their work and activities.

Like women, however, the work that children did as members of a family was overlooked and deemed as insignificant. The dominant ideology as well as the concepts in the academic debates about the socialization and development of the child played an important role in undermining the place of children in the broader division of labour within the society. This developmental concept made them invisible altogether from the mainstream society. The notion of what is 'work' and who are children cast its shadow upon them. This shadow was too dark and long to permit perceptions of their existence in the world of work. Their visibility was ruled out. This mind set looked upon children's work in the child labour debate as having both positive and negative aspects in the context of child's socialization and development. This approach to examine children's work, however, did not last long. In the last decade, a section of sociological theorists argued that the concept of work and the concept of childhood both needed reconsideration. This led to the state in which an important section of scholars (e.g. Solberg, 1990; Morrow, 1992; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1994) put forth grounds justifying the position of children as social actors in society, in general, and as workers in the wider area of the division of labour, in particular. This perspective put emphasis on the issue of considering children's work in terms of their agency – a concept altogether new and important in as much as it helped to bring them on a level with adults.

In the family economy it may be noted that initially it was only male adults who were considered as the breadwinners of the household. Though women were no less engaged in family work their labour was not given any monetary value. It was only on the advent of the Feminist Movement in the 1960s that women's contribution to domestic labour was given any recognition, although it has not achieved universal recognition as yet. However, the focus on women ignored the role of children in household economies. Their contribution in the family's economic activities was largely ignored. In the last few years the sociology of childhood emerged as a potential

area of research and it highlighted the need to review and research the extent and nature of children's contribution to the family economy. The discussion below is a response to this call.

British Indians in Small-Scale Retailing Businesses

The last few decades have seen a significant growth is self-employment among British Indians. In 1991, the number of self-employed British Indians rose to more than sixty seven thousand which is 11.4 percent of the total Indians in Britain (OPCS, 1993). These self-employed Indians are of two types: self-employed with employees and self-employed without employees. The majority of self-employed Indians are in retailing and restaurant business with no employees. Their small 'corner shops' of mainly grocery and off-licence are spread all over England and in some parts of Scotland. In 1992, the magazine *Asian Business* reported that in London 'Asians' (which includes only Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshis settlers) own 90 percent of such outlets. The Ethnic Minority Business Service Newsletter (1992) also reported that out of 43,700 grocery shops more than 30,000 were owned by Asian[1] businessmen. In another estimate Aziz (1995) reported that over 50 per cent of independent retail outlets in Britain are owned by Asians (quoted in Barrett et al, 1996). Metcalf and others noted:

'The Asian groups may indeed have increased their share in small-scale retail sector: the confectioner, Mars, estimated that by the end of the 1980s Asian owned 65 percent of the independent retail outlets in the country, including 95 percent of outlets in London. They have however, also diversified into other sectors, so that by 1994, only half of Asian self-employed was in retail'. (Metcalf et al., 1997: 10)

The growth of Asian owned small-scale retailing businesses in Britain is explained by the 'push' and 'pull' theory. Some researchers believe that the increase in self-employment among Indians is because of their disadvantaged position in the British labour market (Cater and Jones, 1978; Jones, 1982; Mullins, 1979; McEvoy and Aldrich, 1986; Jones et al., 1994). These researchers argue that the structural factors such as high unemployment, under-employment, job dissatisfaction, racial discrimination and lack of opportunities 'push' Indians into self-employment. However, the 'push' theory has come under criticism. It is argued that Indians were not 'pushed' into self-employment by job market constraints. Their self-employment in small scale retail sector is a result of their self-elected goals of financial gain and independent entrepreneurship (Barrett et al., 1996). The cultural traits of Indians such as self-sacrifice, hard-work for long hours, saving, family loyalty brought them into self-employment activities. The peculiar characteristics of industriousness and self-reliance among Indians 'pulled' them into small scale retail businesses. Indians' cultural resources became the vehicle for the success in the busi-nesses. (Metcalf et al., 1995). The cultural resource theory claims that Indian migrants were 'pulled' rather than 'pushed' into self-employment in (Barrett et al., 1996; Borooah and Hart, 1999).

Apart from many other 'pull' factors, the cultural resource theory argues that family labour plays a very critical role in the Indian small-scale retailing businesses. The empirical studies on ethnic entrepreneurs find that South Asians particularly Indian shop-keepers rely heavily on the unpaid or under-paid labour of spouses and children in the family (Glence, 1983; Willson, 1983; Sanders and Nee, 1996; Srinivasan, 1995; Willson and Stanworth, 1988). In her study of 94 South Asian owned small businesses in Oxford, Srinivasan (1995) finds that 72 % shopkeepers had their spouses actively working in the shop while 42 % shopkeepers had their children actively helping in the shop. Since one of the objectives of the research on ethnic minority businesses was to highlight the reasons for the differential growth rate of various ethnic minority and white entrepreneurs and their relative success and failure, the specific contribution of children and other family members has not been explored in detail. Even where research focuses upon the family labour in particular, women's (spouses') contribution to ethnic businesses has been regarded as supplementary labour (Phizacklea, 1988). Song's (1997) study is, perhaps the only study, which addresses the issue of children's labour in Chinese take-away businesses in Britain. Her study revealed that Chinese take-away businesses rely heavily upon children's labour in many ways. Morrow's (1994) study of children's contribution to the domestic economy also reported that 10 percent of the total 730 children studied in Cambridgeshire had had experience of work in their family businesses.

Children's Contribution to Family Businesses in Coventry

To understand the experience of children's work in corner shops owned by their parents, it is necessary to contextualise their children's labour The corner shops in Britain are mostly located in inner city locations because they are dependent on local customers of both ethnic and non-ethnic backgrounds (Luthra, 1997; Barrett et al., 1996). These shops cater for the needs of the local population, particularly the needs of elderly, of single parents, council tenants and ethnic minority residents who have no private cars and are least likely to do bulk buying. The important feature of these corner shops is that most of the retailers have accommodation with their shops or next to the shops. This makes it easier for their families to respond to the call for work at any time and to continue working late. Evidently, the availability of children's labour to shop-work during unsocial hours gives them a major competitive edge in their business.

In view of the dearth of empirical investigations on the family businesses involving children themselves, an exploratory study was carried out during 1997 and 1998 in Coventry, Britain, with children in ten Indian families about various aspects of their work roles in the family businesses. The in-depth interview method was chosen as a practical means of obtaining a range of information on children's involvement in their family run shops. A total of 23 children aged 10-15 years took part in it.

In this study the Coventry families running corner shops consist of only two generations: parents and children. All the children in these families were born in Britain and have been growing in the British socio-economic environment. In other words, these immigrant families moved into their second generation and beyond. Grandparents in these families either live on the same road or in the same city but not with the family of these retailers. However, the study finds that a close tie exists between grandparents and the family and they visit to each other very frequently. The close ties of kinship, family solidarity and loyalty plus the spirit of sacrifice for the family are observable in all the families studied. The call of Indian family values in British surroundings keeps the members of the family together so that problems of labour shortage, safety and security may be faced squarely. In my sample, out of 10 families there were three families in which grandparents still live in India. Parents in these families still retain live ties with their family in India. Mothers in these families are employed in their corner shops on a full time basis along with fathers. For technical reasons it was not possible for me to ascertain whether the formal owner of these shops was the mother or the father, but it was evident that both parents were involved in shop-work. Only in one family did, a child report that apart from the shop-work, her mother undertook some piece work too on casual a basis from outside.

"This is our shop": *Children's explanation and sense of belonging in their family businesses*

This research began from the assumption that children had an important contribution to make in the pool of family labour. This, therefore, impelled us to approach children directly and elicit their opinion on the matter. Children were asked about why they worked in their family shops and if they did not, did it matter in any way. A majority of children expressed the view that the family business belongs to the *whole* family. According to them every member of the family receives the reward of economic gain in some way or other. Since the family shop is a sole source of their family's economic maintenance, they are aware of the after-effects of profit and loss of the shop. The children also reported that if they did not share in the shop work the business would be directly affected which would ultimately affect them as well. Some of them also said that if outsiders were engaged in their place the wages given to them would be a loss to the family income and hence to them as well. For them, family business is a joint social and economic enterprise and responsibility. While their labour was invaluable, the notion of payment was not cast in hourly wages and conventional benefits that accrue as a result of years of contribution to its survival. Payment for labour came more in kind than in money and without protestation from its contributors. Collective labour inputs also led to collective ownership of the profits, although it was necessarily controlled by all in the family. This is exemplified in the following quotes: A male child stated:

I work here, because this is our shop. If we won't work then who else will work?

.....Well my dad runs it but we all are the part of it.

Look I'll tell you. If we go out, our friends

identify me as a shop owner because they believe that this is our family shop. So isn't this our shop? Since we all share the jobs, we all own it. That's what I mean.

The income of our shop is also ours. We all share it.

Whatever we want we get from our parents. See, the income of the shop is spent on our food, our dress and whatever we need. That's the way we share our income. And if we share the income we're supposed to work together.

No I don't think so. We are getting everything. Sometimes we get cash to spend the way we want, so what's the point of expecting wages.

A female child proclaimed:

Our shop is our identity. We are known as shop owners among our friends. It's a different matter that my father owns the shop. But we all believe that this is ours. That's why we all work together in it.

This is our shop.

Yes, this is true that my dad and mum are the owners of this shop and the shop gives employment to them, but we all are related to the shop.

Because we all share the jobs in the shop and we also share the income.

Say, whatever we spend it comes from the shop. So this is ours.

These statements bring out two important issues: firstly, children emphasise their identities as shop owners and secondly, they feel that they are sufficiently rewarded in kind for their efforts in their family businesses. These two opinions reinforces the link between co-responsibility and collective ownership in family run businesses, despite the age gaps and hierarchical positioning of family membership. Although the principal responsibility of running the business falls on the shoulders of their parents, the responsibilities that children take on with their parents renders them indispensable to the smooth functioning of the enterprises. Children and parents together constitute the economic resource and the labour inputs for their family business. Because of the joint responsibilities children claim almost equal ownership of the family resources. Through this claim they establish themselves as economically active members of a productive unit, the family and the family shop.

Children's work in general in advanced economies tends to be seen negatively because of the perceived notion, in western terms, as making children vulnerable to exploitative forces. Within this general Eurocentric assumption, children's work in ethnic businesses is considered detrimental for their development (see Jackson and Gravey, 1974). Work in the family farm as opposed to work in the family business has taken on strong racial and ethnic connotations. Song for instance critically observed:

'One reason why children's work in ethnic businesses may be negatively singled out in Britain, as in other western societies, is that children's work in Chinese take-aways, for instance, is performed in a racialized work niche associated with derogatory notions of being Chinese; work in a take -away business does not evoke the wholesome images of children helping out on the family farm.' (1996: 103)

Song's critique found association in Morrow's (1994) work in which she opposed the general assumption that children work in their family businesses because of their ethnic background. Her study finds that children of non-ethnic background also contribute to family businesses in Britain, particularly in rural areas. Therefore, it is wrong to address ethnicity as a sole reason for the involvement of children in family businesses. While I do not dispute that the family businesses have a characteristic feature of labour mobilisation of family members on the grounds of particular cultural traits (Metcalf et al., 1997) and children contribute to family business as a support mechanism, I would argue that we need to asses the children's resource structure through which children respond to such need. In this light, children are to be seen not only as the victims of the specific needs of ethnic businesses and /or vehicles of cultural resources of these families, but as potential 'agents'. Children in this study also seemed to be aware of the socio-political contexts in which their family businesses operated. There was sharp competition, challenges on racial grounds, non-availability of reliable labour and negative perceptions of working in shops that combined to affect family businesses. The following paragraphs illustrate that children were instrumental in overcoming all these handicaps on the one hand and on the other formed a pillar of strength for the family business.

The Nature and Extent of Children's Contribution to Family Businesses

The accounts of children's experiences of

working in their family shops reveal that they contribute to family businesses in at least three ways. Firstly, their experience of work is as a shop assistant who carries out all sorts of jobs to assist in the smooth running of the business. They serve as counter assistants, crisis-shooters and vigilantes in the shop premises.

Children as Shop Assistants

The majority of children in the families studied reported that they availed themselves to everything that was necessary to do in the shops – ranging from buying from wholesalers to stacking of goods, serving customers and keeping the premises clean. Their contributions were made mainly after school hours and during weekends, although in some instances children reported stacking shelves even in the mornings before going to school. A male child narrated his routine:

On Friday afternoon we go to warehouse to bring run out items. In the evening we arrange them in the shop. Sometimes we do it on Saturday morning too. Friday evening and Saturday whole day our shop is busy so we stay in the shop.

There is lot to do. Sometimes I serve the counter. Sometimes I arrange the shop and do a bit of stacking. Otherwise I'm around.

On weekdays, in the morning I open the shop with my dad and then I do a bit of stacking. Then I go to the college. In the evening I serve the counter for a while. I put the (beer) cans in the refrigerator. That's it.

On Saturday normally the whole day I spend in the shop. On Sunday, I stay almost half of the day and weekdays about three to four hours. Actually if I'm not doing anything at home (then) I'm in the shop.

Another female child reported:

I do everything. I serve, I do stacking, I help the customers in getting the things. ..... Normally I stay here [shop] for couple of hours. .....Like whenever my dad needs a break for tea, (then) I serve the counter. When he goes outside or do unloading the goods from the van then I serve the customers. It's like that. There is no fixed hours but whenever he needs me I help him out. In the evenings I'm usually in the shop and do whatever is needed.

Usually my dad goes[to the warehouse], but sometimes my mum goes with him. Sometimes I go with my dad.

...No. Normally Fridays and weekends are more busy [than other days].

[I have been helping my parents for the last] …three to four years.

It's not fixed. But usually If I'm not doing anything at home I come to the shop. If I've to do something in the kitchen then only I stay there,....otherwise I come to the shop. .... usually in the evening I'm here for two-three hours. ..... yeah! On weekends I spend some more time in the shop. .... About four to five [hours] everyday.

From the above responses it is evident that children contribute in excess of 30 hours per week, including weekends, in their family businesses. It has become so much of a routine that it hardly constitutes work in the conventional sense of the word because remuneration through money is non-existent. Much of what they do is viewed more as a sense of responsibilities than otherwise and as a means towards achieving higher goals – either in their educational endeavours or in expansion of the family business. In this sense the notions of work and responsibility must be reviewed and differentiated in accordance with familial responsibility and possibly cultural expectations in family operated enterprises. Work in the conventional sense is rewarded with payment in money while responsibility in the collective sense of the family is rewarded in a more holistic way – such as through education, provision of incidental requirements and basic necessities, a sense of belonging and the comforts of family that revolves around lineal affiliation, love and interdependence. This is why children feel a responsibility in taking on the role of crisis-shooter.

Children as 'Crisis-Shooters' and Vigilantes

Children are indispensable as crisis shooters: they resolve crisis situations, particularly those related to an urgent demand for labour in the shop. For example, whenever there is an urgent demand for labour to deal with problematic customers, when there are too many customers to serve at once or when parents are sick or are out of station, children become the indispensable and readily available reliable cogs in the wheels of family enterprises. Thirdly, children contribute to family businesses as vigilant shop watchers. Coventry has a reputation for a measure of anti-Asian sentiments that often manifests through bad

behaviour in regular corner stores and local supermarkets by local thugs. In this sense children's presence as family members often helps to stave off provocative actions against family that are serving the public and theft from the shelves. Since home is often part of the complex in which the shop is situated, kin are almost always readily available and are able to avail themselves at a moments notice when the need arises. Children tend to play this role meticulously, in the same way that they act as good vigilantes when the there is a need to.

A male respondent reported spoke of his role as vigilante in the shop:

Well, when loads of customers come at one time some of them are good, but some of them are not. Some of them pick the things and put in their pockets. They hide the things to steal. If we are around they can't do such things. We keep an eye on them. It's always good to be in the shop.

Whenever there is a crowd of customers in the shop. Sometimes they come in a group and some of them stand at the counter and try to keep my dad busy while one or two go inside and try to hide things. In such times my dad calls us. Then we come and watch them.

He rings the bell which is there (underneath the serving counter). When we hear the bell we leave all the jobs and pop in immediately.

Another female child said:

Last week we had a problem in the shop. Two guys came and had a case of beer and few other things. They just started talking with my mum. My mum was alone in the shop at that time. In the mean time a third man entered the shop - who was actually their friend. He also took a case of beer and went outside. When my mum suspected something was wrong she called me. I was in the kitchen, so I left the dishes and went outside. She asked me to stop that man and to ask about the payment. I went outside and said: "did you pay for the case" he said yeah. I came inside and told Mum that he said he had paid. Then my mum said, "No, he hasn't". Then my mum called him and asked when did he pay? He tried to lie by saying that his friend paid for it but got caught in his own words and they ended up paying for both cases.

[Does it happen often?]

Normally not, but some customers always try to cheat. In that case if we have at least two people in the shop we can check them. One serves the counter and other watches on customers. If you are alone they try to cheat you.

The above experiences confirm the vigilante and crisis shooting roles that children play in their parents businesses. Their surveillance is tantamount to the roles of night-watchmen and is possible in a country such as Britain because law and order not only enjoys public support but is also effectively implemented by a respectable police force. Hoodlums and cheats are aware that shoplifting is a serious crime and the price that they are likely to pay for it is outweighed by what they might steal from a shopkeeper. That is why the man who took the case of beers and quietly walked out finally agreed to pay for it when he was recalled, astutely trying to conceal his guilt by claiming that he thought his friends had paid for them. In other instances children's roles as vigilantes are respected for the same reasons, as the former quotation suggests, despite the fact that they could be easily overpowered for the children that they are. Drunks acting as nuisances and engaging in unnecessary conversations are also problems that children have reported to have taken care of. Their presence tends to ward off such nuisances, especially when they notice that children have an integral part of the workforce in the shops.

CHILDREN AS SUBSTITUTE MANAGERS

The role of children as substitute managers in their family businesses presented itself as a recurrent phenomenon among the target group in Coventry. Their integral engagement in business becomes a substantively enriching experience to the extent that their skills are acquired without the stresses and strains that formalised education generally imposes upon children. Their roles and responsibilities are adopted through observation, adhering to commands and instructions from their parents and implementing them in time without having to be told what to do. The family business has become an arena for more than basic training in salesmanship to children who participate in it. It endows upon them levels of leadership and responsibilities that can easily be misunderstood as mere menial tasks that do not require managerial skills to ensure its smooth operation. But this is not true. It is a multifaceted responsibility that depends upon a range of factors, including the discipline to work up to 12 hours per day, keeping

track of stocks as they deplete from the shelves, ensuring a continuous supply of the most basic and popular items, having to deal with a diverse range of personalities on a personal basis, and controlling cash that requires integrity and honesty of the highest expectations.

One female respondent stated that she worked in the shop for about five weeks in place of her father since he was away. On recalling her experience, she said:

I did all the jobs. We used to open the shop at about 8 in the morning. We had to put everything properly. We had to put the vegetable boxes on the table in front of the shop. We did all this by half past eight and thereafter my mum came in while I had to go to college - at about half past nine. At about 2 o'clock (in the afternoon) I finished college and returned to the shop and remained there until eight in the evening.

Oh. Yeah! I still help in the shop, but not that much. I was terribly busy in those days. I couldn't take a day off from the shop. I had to keep going all the time. I gave my full time to the shop, but now I work for only few hours. Now my dad is there to look after the shop.

Usually when my dad or mum falls ill I have to take up all the jobs in the shop. Whenever they have to go out I give more time to the shop.

In similar circumstances a male respondent explained how his involvement had suddenly increased in the shop for the previous few months:

I'm helping in the shop for the last couple of years, but from the last two months I'm extremely busy in the shop.

Because, my dad is not well for the last two months. Earlier he used to do most of the jobs in the shop but now he can't do that much so I have to take care of some of his jobs.

I do nearly everything. I open the shop, serve behind the counter and go to the warehouse.

No.... no. My mum is there. She looks after the shop when I'm in the college. When I come back we both do the shop-work.

No. When my dad will be all right I will not be that busy. This is only because he is not well and we can't shut off our shop. We've to run it.

The circumstances referred to by the children in the above quotations demonstrate that the extent of their involvement in the family businesses increased substantially in situations of need. It is generally understood as a given that the absence of one member of a family can only be substituted by another member of the family. Inter-dependence on family in the business precludes the employment of outsiders during such periods of crises, as one respondent confirmed:

It's not good to employ outsiders in the shop. We have a private and a small business and we can't afford to hire an employee. Actually you can't get reliable people who work in this shop. Even If you get anybody you have to pay for it, and if we start paying to outsiders then what will we earn? Even it's not wise to have an outsider employee for a short period.

No. When my dad is there we don't need anybody else. Actually both my dad and mum work together and they manage the shop very well. And I'm also there to help them every moment so I don't think they need anybody else.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above focussed on children in three roles in their family businesses viz. their contributions as assistants on a regular basis in their shops, their roles as watchful vigilantes and their roles as substitute managers. Through each of these aspects they demonstrated at least four issues that are relevant to anthropological analysis of small scale family enterprises viz. their willingness to live up to their roles and expectations as children of their families, the close-knit bonds that family enterprises engender within the domestic unit, the training and discipline that children acquire over time in their businesses, and the twin factors of a sense of belonging and identity that envelops their existence as people of Indian origin in a foreign country. Awareness of their responsibilities and need to protect their earnings through business has propounded a degree of defensiveness about family labour that precludes the employment of outsiders to engage in work with them. And their willingness to assume protective responsibilities over family and property during periods of business with people of questionable intentions emerges from a spunky determination that is entrenched in a vitreous presence to defend what is theirs. That is why they feel a sense of ownership over their family enterprises and often passionately claim that "this is our shop". But this is also why they are different from their counterparts who are entrapped in bonded labour where exploitation assumes forms that are vitiated

by the people and practices which represent the opposite of what family businesses do for their young children. While bonded and exploitative labour enforces invisibility of children at work, family businesses raises the visibility of their children and empowers them towards becoming self fulfilling agents of entrepreneurship. It is their visibility that reduces shoplifting, wards off hoodlums and thugs, and demonstrates family bondage through tireless labour that is seldom below 12 hours per day and that is often interspersed with going to school or college or doing academic chores in between covering for parents in their shops.

NOTES

1 These reports use the term Asian for only Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indians and Sri Lankan Population in Britain.

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KEYWORDS British Indians. Diaspora. Coventry. Indian Family Business. Children

ABSTRACT This paper focuses on children aged between 10 and 15 years old, and their contribution to the management of small-scale family businesses in Coventry, Britain. Its focus is on their significant involvement in their family businesses which is often underestimated, undervalued and rendered almost insignificant. In respect of this, two issues are discussed viz.: the nature and extent of children's involvement in the family business and the reasons for their involvement in the family businesses. The aims that follow from this discussion are twofold viz. defining children's partnership by exploring the areas of their sense of belonging to it, and second, in adapting and applying children's understanding of 'work' and 'business' – in the context of the sociology of childhood and entrepreneurship in family businesses.

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Anthropologist Special Issue No. **2:** 89-97 (2007)

Indian Diaspora-The 21st Century-Migration, Change and Adaptation
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