

January 7, 2021

Love Taboos: Controlling Hindu-Muslim Romances

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The myth of ‘love jihad’ is sustained through widely circulated illustrations of ‘lustful’ Muslim men and ‘victimised’ Hindu women. These images recirculate decades-old calumnies and make invisible Hindu men’s regulation of Hindu women.

Till recently an emotive, violent campaign and a political fantasy of Hindutva forces, the opposition to interfaith romantic relationships has now taken the shape of a law. Uttar Pradesh, with its ordinance that criminalises interfaith marriages as ‘love jihad’, has declared and stamped itself as a Hindu patriarch.

The [Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020](#) is not only closely aligned to the ruling power’s ideology, but has a distinct and definite gender and religion. It emerges from a consensus among Hindu groups that women cannot exercise any choice in love, sans familial and community approval. Anxieties over who is bedding and wedding Hindu women are embedded in a distinct Hindu nationalism, along with a simultaneous rewriting and redefining of morality and patriarchal norms.

The law is in many ways a logical culmination of the crusade against the mythical ‘love jihad’, which first featured amongst Hindutva groups around 2005. But it has a longer history behind it. The fabricated metaphors of ‘love jihad’ have uncanny resemblances and parallels to the campaigns launched by the Arya Samaj in the 1920s in north India against the ‘abduction’ of Hindu women, and the larger politics of such mobilisations (Gupta 2009; 2016). At the same time, the journey of a century — 1920 to 2020 — is not linear. While there are historical conjunctures and larger continuities in this grand Hindutva narrative, there are also critical ruptures, differences and additions.

In the 1920s, rumours of abduction and forced conversion of Hindu women were largely confined to the inside pages of newspapers, to mofussil towns and courts, and to the fringes. Today the calumny of ‘love jihad’ becomes front-page coverage, and campaigns against interreligious relationships are sanctified by the ruling party with full support from the state’s law machinery and police.

The very term ‘love jihad’, deployed by Hindu extremists and which has become a part of our everyday lexicon, carries within it an ingrained Islamophobia that combines two antithetical ideas. Both the words are also perceived as ‘foreign’ and ‘alien’ to the Indian soil. ‘Love’ (or even ‘Romeo’, as in UP police’s ‘[anti-Romeo squads](#)’) sits more comfortably here than indigenous terms like *prem* or *ishq*. In these times of social distancing, demonisation of the Muslim, and strengthening of social fissures and of Brahmanical patriarchies, the coordinated and well-thought-out Hindutva offensive against interfaith relationships has acquired a wider social currency and acceptance.

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the governments controlled by it have at their command many more ideological weapons, political tools, and print and visual vocabularies than ever before to spread the bogey of ‘love jihad’. Print cultures played a critical role in the spread of abduction fictions in the urban geography of colonial India during the 1920s, the forerunner to contemporary rumours of ‘love jihad’. However, the intensity and reach of media then was nowhere near the present circulation of the print, visual, digital, and web industry. The constant and instant mass social media, WhatsApp messages, and prime-time television serve up an avalanche of sensational and provocative tweets, hashtags, and videos that construct supposed ‘truths’ about Muslims (Farokhi 2021, 226-244).

The situation on the ground is vastly different. A BJP minister [declared](#) in parliament that no case of ‘love jihad’ had been registered by central authorities and that there was no such term defined in law. (Even the UP law and the several others planned in its model do not use this term.) Several serious [probes](#) have [time and again](#) found no proof of coercion or organised conspiracy to convert Hindu women through deceitful marriages.

Why then the law now, at this present moment? The aim of the ‘love jihad’ campaign has been to produce docile and submissive subjects who will not question regimes of power (Sarkar 2018). The UP ordinance stokes a central polarising issue, now that the Ram mandir is a done deed. It keeps up the communal heat in upcoming elections in West Bengal and Assam. It is a device to woo the electorally significant upper-caste Christians in Kerala, who were **amongst the first** to use the term ‘love jihad’. It buttresses Hindu male prowess and dominance and further demonises and marginalises the Muslim male. It strengthens the disciplining and infantilising of the Hindu woman and reinstates familial patriarchies. It sustains fabricated fears of declining Hindu numbers and reinforces imagined ‘threats’ of religious conversions. It is an issue, which unlike that of cow protection, papers over caste tensions and hierarchies and projects an abstract homogenous Hindu identity. The law signals all this and something more.

The exclusivist grammar of difference ingrained in the UP law has been bolstered by the clampdown on the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the Covid-19 crisis, both of which in different ways strengthen political-social stigma and discriminatory behaviour. The CAA has been variously critiqued for violating the secular principles, and for discriminating against the Muslims. In the initial months of Covid-19, Muslims were marked as the ‘morbid other’. Segregated spatiality between the supposed corrupt public and the pristine private, between desirable intimacies and undesirable bodies, has acquired a new force.

Constructing the ‘lustful’ Muslim male

The ‘war’ against the mythical ‘love jihad’ has been waged through popular print and images. There has been a flood of booklets spreading the bogey of ‘love jihad’, such as the 2014, *Love Jihad: Red Alert for Hindu Girls*, written by the Sree Rama Sena’s Pramod Muthalik, which gave detailed instructions on how to impose love taboos on Hindu women and how to forestall them from ‘becoming victims’. At the 2018 World Book Fair in Delhi, a senior RSS functionary launched *Ek Mukhauta Aisa Bhi* (‘A Mask Like This’), a book that was subtitled as “a collection of stories on love jihad”.



Front and Back Covers of Pramod Muthalik’s *Love Jihad: Red Alert for Hindu Girls* | Loonwatch (Accessed 26 August 2014)

The widespread visual vocabulary and popular iconography in such propaganda conjoins two symbolically central figures: the ‘bestial’ Muslim male and the ‘victimised’ and ‘foolish’ Hindu woman. As also reflected in the UP law, the ‘enemy’ within and without is reconfigured and rendered visible as actor and subject.

Such negative representations were present in colonial India too. In the present context of global demonisation of Islam and Muslims, past images of Muslim men which emphasise their ‘lecherousness’ have acquired much more sinister colours. Such imaginaries have sharpened the Hindutva semiotics of ‘love jihad’ into more fearful forms, continuing the long lineage of mapping the Muslim male body as ‘evil’.



Illustration of a Muslim bangle seller with a Hindu woman | Vyanga Chitravali, Allahabad, 1930

Take for instance *Panchjanya*, the weekly mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which had in 2014 an article on ‘love jihad’. The magazine’s cover had an illustration of a man wearing a traditional Arab headdress (*kaffiyeh*), a beard in the shape of heart, and sunglasses in which red hearts were reflected. The magazine asked on the cover: “Is love blind or is it trafficking” (“*pyar andha ya dhandha*”).



Panchjanya cover story on 'love jihad' (7 September 2014) | Personal collection of the author

The use of roses and hearts in such images hints at Hindutva's campaign against the 'indecent' Valentine's day. The rhetoric of 'love jihad' gives the targets an explicit face, gender, and religion. It produces a master narrative of Muslim male aggression and Hindu woman's seizure. Combined with the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, the imagined dangers and threats of the Muslim 'peril' mirror deep anxieties about the 'infiltration' of this 'Other' in domestic, intimate, sexual and social spaces, as well as anxieties of transgressions by women, thus endangering the domain of life cherished as most private and 'pure'.



An image circulating on social media sites | [Twitter](#)

In the process, the centre of sexual violence moves from men in general and Hindu men in particular towards the Muslim male, invisibilising the hegemonic strategies of Hindu men's regulation of Hindu women. Terming interfaith relationships as 'love jihad' allows the portrayal of the Muslim as the 'evil incarnate', shifting the registers of violence against women. The spectre of illegibility is marked as Muslim. This is of course, critically linked to the fictive demographic fear of Hindus being outnumbered by others, which is central to Hindutva politics and to 'love jihad' (Rao, 2011). By combining the lament against conversion with a simultaneous upholding of reconversion, even a demographic and dominant majority can portray itself as an 'endangered' minority.

The 'victimised' Hindu woman

The second image that has been central to both the UP law and the narrative of 'love jihad' is of the 'foolish' and 'victimised' Hindu woman, who is 'lured' and 'brainwashed' into a 'trap'. A printed illustration that has particularly gone viral depicts a Muslim man in a green shirt riding an expensive motorcycle and thinking of conversion. A Hindu woman sits behind, hugging him and thinking of love. The two of them are riding away from a Hindu temple. This illustration has been used by the 'Anti Love Jihad Front' on its Facebook page and by the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti in its booklets on 'Love Jihad', which have been published in multiple languages including English, Hindi, and Marathi.



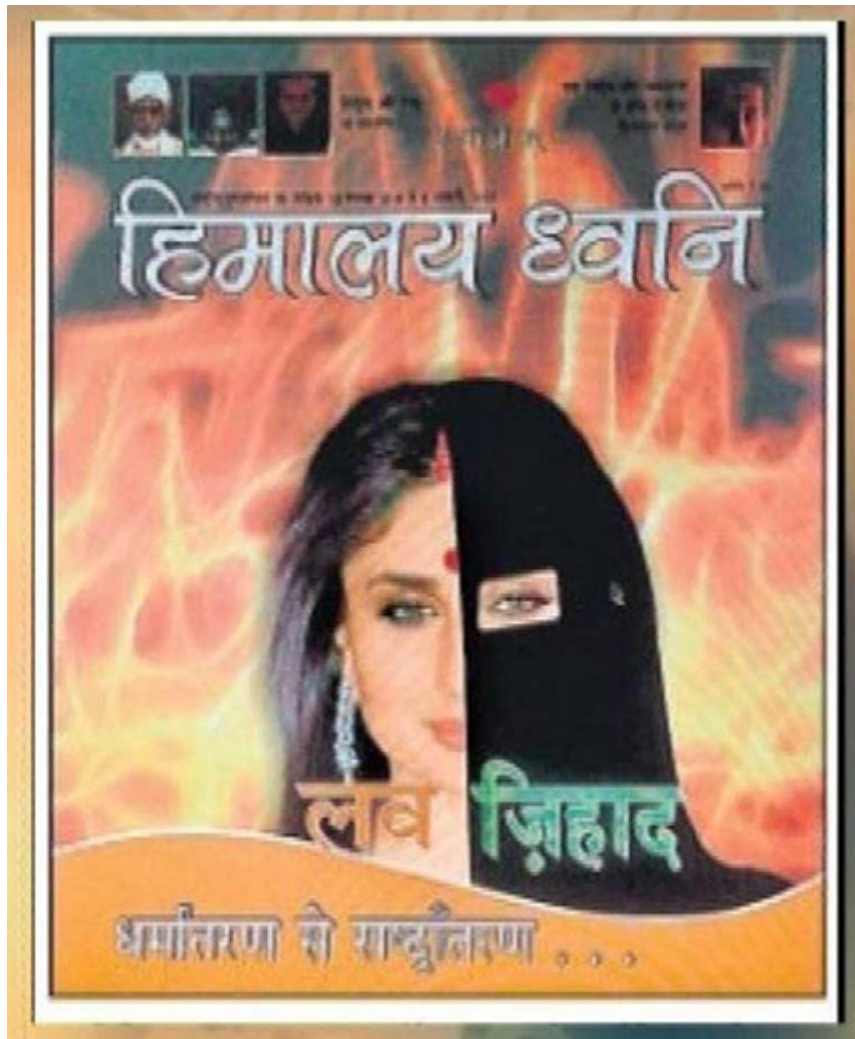
A poster titled ‘An Appeal to Hindu Brothers: Wake up Hindus, Wake up; Beware of Love Jihad!’ | Youth Ki Awaaz

The text in the poster above reads: “By sporting [fake] Hindu names, tying a sacred thread on their hand and putting a tika on their forehead, Muslim boys trap Hindu girls in love, convert them, marry them, have children with them, exploit them physically and mentally, and then leave them.” (Translation by the author)



English, Hindi and Marathi booklets titled ‘Love Jihad’, published by Hindu Janajagriti Samiti | Personal collection of the author

In convoluted ways as these, Hindu women are told that interfaith romance is not only undesirable, but stopping it is good for the women themselves. There are various websites, helplines and counselling sites for women who are purportedly ‘victims’ of ‘love jihadists’. It is repeatedly stressed that the mere act of marrying a Muslim or converting to Islam ensures unhappiness and a dreadful fate of the Hindu woman. There has been a flood of images which depict Hindu women married to Muslim men as behind bars or in a burqa. The most notorious of these is an image of the Bollywood actor Kareena Kapoor (married to fellow actor Saif Ali Khan), published in 2015 on the cover of *Himalaya Dhvani*, a magazine of the Durga Vahini, the women’s wing of Vishva Hindu Parishad.



Cover of Himalaya Dhvani: “Love jihad: From Religious Conversion to Converting the Country.” | Personal collection of the author

हिन्दुओं सावधान!

लव जिहाद



प्रेम छल-कपट निकाह धर्मान्तरण प्रत्याहना

अपनी बहन, बेटियों को "लव-जिहाद" के बारे में जानकारी देकर जागरूक करें और उन्हें "लव-जिहाद" का शिकार होने से बचाएं।

लव जिहाद के विरुद्ध विशाल धरना प्रदर्शन में सहभागी हो।

लव-जिहाद के विरुद्ध राष्ट्रवादी शिवसेना व यूनाइटेड हिन्दु फ्रंट का विशाल धरना प्रदर्शन

दिनांक: 23 सितंबर 2014
समय: 10:00 बजे प्रतः
स्थान - जंतर-मंतर, नई दिल्ली

सम्पर्क सूत्र:-
Ph: 011 - 22325555/6666 Mob: 9899798000

Poster announcing a demonstration against 'love jihad'. New Delhi, 2014 | Personal collection of the author

The text in the poster above reads: "Hindus Beware: Love Jihad Love-Fraud-Marriage-Conversion-Pain. Make your sisters and daughters aware of 'love jihad' and save them from becoming its victims!" (Translation by the author)

In the 1920s too, images of the 'foolish' and 'stupid' Hindu woman coalesced with those of her as an innocent, defenceless, hapless, and objectified victim, and Hindu society was urged to accept her. In such articulations, one can also discern a ghostly, shadowy presence of social reforms, with an element of humanitarian concern for the condition of women. In the present moment though, there is no semblance of reformist energy. For politicised Hinduism, religious identity is a protean category, and managing the domestic is crucial to stabilise it.

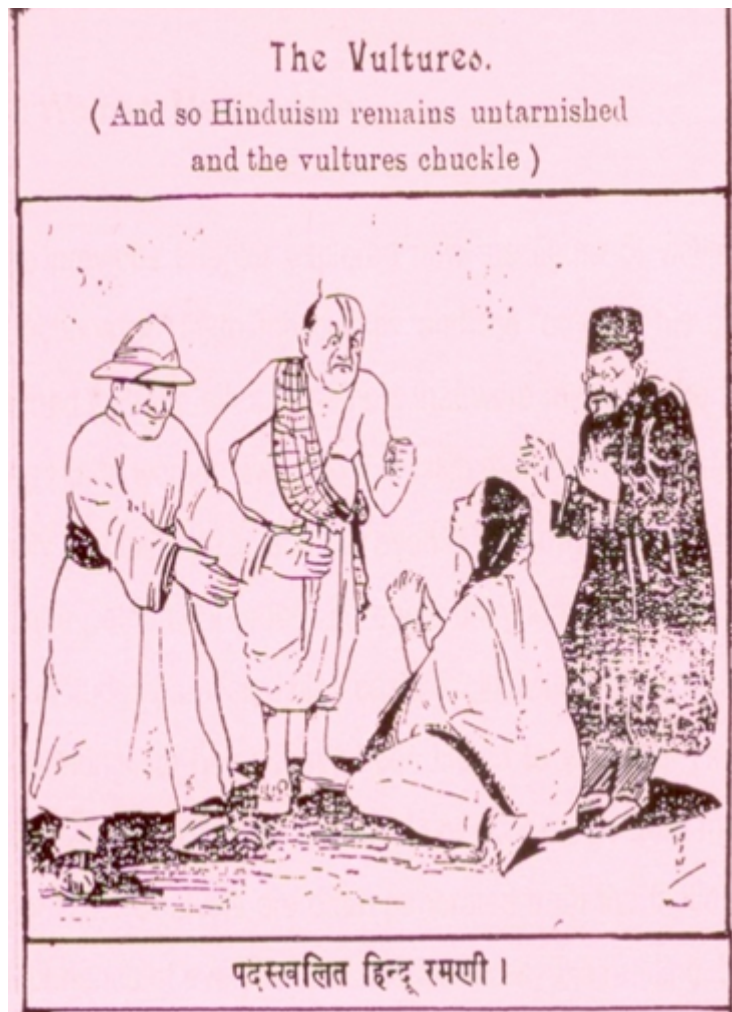


Illustration titled 'The Fallen Hindu Woman'. Vyanga Chitravali. Kanpur, 1925 | Personal collection of author

Accompanying text (not in the image):

Hindu Woman: God, my feet slipped by mistake, give me some corner in Hindu society to cover my head.

Upholders of Hindu Society: Ram, Ram , it is a sin even to see your face. Will you pull down society too along with you?

Christian: Sister, come into the peaceful lap of Father Christ!

Muslim: For God's sake, direct your faith towards Islam, we'll take good care of you. (Translation by the author)



Illustration titled 'You have Fallen'. Vyanga Chitravali. Kashi,1933 | Personal collection of the author

Text in the illustration above :

Panchayat: When Maula Baksh says you have drunk water from his pot, you must have done so.

Woman: No father, he wanted to rape me. He says this because of my refusal.

Panchayat: No, you have now fallen, get out from here. (Translation by the author)

The visual imaginations of the Muslim male — smart , well dressed, and constantly mobile — and those of the Hindu woman — caged, facing atrocities, prostitution, blackmail, and in a static state — insidiously strengthen the message of 'love jihad'. Such visual signification, and its pervasive consumption mediates reality and fantasy. The repeated use of Hindi words like *sachet*, *savdhaan* and *jagruk*, all synonyms for being aware and careful, address the Hindu male and invoke the need for him to watch over Muslim men and Hindu women.

Since women and men of different religions and castes share the most extended and close contact — routine, cumulative, mundane — at workplaces and in sites of everyday living, it is there that love and desire arise most frequently. As early as the 1920s, such shared spaces evoked anxieties. Every Hindu Sabha was urged to keep a list of jobs which brought Muslims in contact with Hindu women. A whole new language was employed for women vis-à-vis Muslims, and symbols perceived as Islamic, telling them how to move, whom to talk to, where to go, and what to do.



Illustration ridiculing Hindu women who visited pirs (Muslim saints). Vyanga Chitravali. Allahabad, 1930 | Personal collection of the author

Accompanying text (not in image):

Abandoning 33 crore Gods, abandoning all prestige of the family!

See the frenzy of these women, who worship pirs!!

These jitters and fantasies about intimacies perceived as ‘illicit’ have only grown stronger in contemporary urban private and public spaces. This has led to the marking, identification, and surveillance of several everyday urban public arenas and of some private spaces as sites where Hindu girls are ‘wooed’. They include schools, colleges, parks, theatres, ice-cream and juice parlours, mobile recharge shops; and private spaces like television and internet. These urban markers, particularly the mobile phone, symbolise the loss of innocence, which lures the vulnerable woman to a life of darkness. Some *khap panchayats* have banned women from carrying [mobile phones](#). A booklet by Hindu Janajagruti Samiti concludes that “mobile phone is the single most effective weapon of love jihad.”

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The ‘love jihad’ campaign of Hindutva, along with the circulation of such images, constructs every interfaith love, romance, or marriage as a deception. In such a climate, a [Tanishq advertisement](#), a scene from the [web series A Suitable Boy](#), an [Assamese television serial Begum Jaan](#) — anything that even remotely depicts the arc of Hindu female desire for men outside the community — is regulated as transgression, which produces moral disciplining and everyday violence along the alliance model of sexuality, where through arrangements of marriages, boundaries of religion and caste are policed. It is precisely the malleability of Hindutva discourse that portrays interfaith relationships as ‘love jihad’, and its wider application in the form of laws, which has made it even more insidious.

Various regulatory mechanisms have thus evolved to control freedom of choice and shrink the mobility and space for young urban Hindu women, and reorganise the urban public sphere according to a gendered Hindu private and civic order (Tyagi and Sen 2020). Couched in the language of ‘protection’ is a grim coercive power and disciplinary regime, that views women who desire and who chose their own partners as an enemy within and as a menace to Hindutva. A nation coded as Hindu is deciding the rules of love, intimacy and desire.

Ground realities and recalcitrant desires

While there is no official survey, [various studies](#) suggest that interfaith marriages in India are just about 2.2% of all marriages. Already a small number, they are now under threat as never before. Police selectively target interfaith marriages between Muslim men and Hindu women, as is clear from different approaches adopted in the Bareilly and Moradabad cases in December 2020. Interfaith couples attempting to register under the Special Marriages Act have faced harassment, scrutiny, and threats from officials, vigilante groups and families. The average Muslim male’s family in these times is extremely afraid and fearful, and has been increasingly pushed to a corner with the onslaught from various directions. Muslim men are denied the language of love.

|| The lived lives and everyday realities of interfaith couples offer powerful competing narratives. It is important to raise caution about such ebullient aspirations, as societal change [...] is too heavy a burden.

And yet, amidst the various taboos on faith and love, the lived lives and everyday realities of interfaith couples offer powerful competing narratives. It is important to raise caution about such ebullient aspirations, as societal change in terms of caste and religion is too heavy a burden to place on the shoulders of intercaste and interfaith couples. Yet they do produce cracks in orthodox Hindu mandates and on love taboos.

[India Love Project](#), which gathers stories of love and marriage that transcend caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender, has curated on Instagram and Facebook several first-person accounts and has garnered a considerable following. Many have come forward to share stories of intimacy across religious divides. [Dhanak](#), an NGO mostly comprising interfaith and intercaste couples, has evolved organically, and over the years it has emerged as a champion organisation working for the promotion of the ‘right to choice’ in matters of marriage and relationships.

More recently, a group of young people in Bhopal have come together in a campaign they call [Ishq Par Zor Nahi](#) (‘No compulsion in love’), which is working to fight against the propaganda of ‘love jihad’ and give a face and voice to interfaith couples. The left All India Student Association has started a nationwide campaign called [‘Love Azad’](#), to counter the lies of ‘love jihad’ and the unconstitutional law.

Alongside, in spite of grave threat, many women have expressed the transcendent possibilities of defiant love. The case of Hadiya has become a cause celebre. Despite the Kerala High Court grossly infantilising Hadiya and eroding her agency to be with a partner of her choice, she stood her ground. (The marriage was ultimately [declared valid](#) by the Supreme Court and she is now reunited with her husband.)

|| The increasing attack on interfaith couples punishes desire, and strengthens gender and religious hierarchies; the actions of lovers signal romantic freedom and new narratives of possibility.

In 2017, came this phenomenal statement:

[I am Saldon, I am Shifah](#). I choose to be both. It saddens me that my marriage and spiritual choice are misused to stoke fear and hatred [...] Nobody asked me my view as if I don’t matter in this game of misogyny played in my name [...] It is a brazen attempt to suppress and threaten a woman who has shown the courage to follow her heart.

[Sameena Dalwai](#), the proud daughter of an interfaith couple, says: “Our life is the answer to the trolls. We exist. The mixed race not only lives but thrives. And makes you all look utterly boring.” More recently, holding her ground amidst tremendous pressure, in Moradabad [Pinki](#) told the court that she is an adult and returned to her husband Rashid Ali’s family, even while her husband and his brother continue to be in jail.

The metaphor of ‘love jihad’ embodies fear and hatred; that of love azad and ishq par zor nahi put forward allegories of desire. The UP law affirms Hindutva’s patriarchal power; the voices and choices of women in interfaith relationships signify religious liminalities and pliable identities. The attacks on religious conversion assert a mono-religious, hegemonic Hindu nation; the choice of faith and religion aids a transformative politics of intimate religious rights. The increasing attack on interfaith couples punishes desire, and strengthens gender and religious hierarchies; the actions of lovers signal romantic freedom and new narratives of possibility. The UP law and the Islamophobia woven in the myth of ‘love jihad’ are serious attempts to bring our everyday private and public lives in line with a Hindu-coded nation. They have to be challenged in every way possible.

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