

FOSTERING FAIR AND BALANCED WORKPLACES: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIAN CORPORATE LAW FIRMS

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ABSTRACT

The deeply rooted work culture in Indian corporate law firms is a structural malaise at the intersection of labour law, political economy, and regulatory governance. It is evident through billable hours that are excessive, unpaid overtime, and categorising associates as “consultants” to misclassify their status. This pattern is in effect a violation of the “Karnataka Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, 1961” and “the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020”. The law’s content has been rendered nugatory, thereby violating constitutional entitlements associated with Articles 14, 19(1)(g), and 21 that represent normative commitments to equality, occupational freedom, and decent livelihood. Politically speaking, this is a condition of regulatory inaction and tacit state complicity that demonstrates a preference for corporate freedom over labour welfare. Economically, the overwork affects the productivity at the expense of total productivity, human capital, sustainability, and institutional legitimacy. The psychosocial toll and ethical decline endanger India’s service economy competitiveness in the long run. Conversely, “Japan’s Work Style Reform Law” demonstrates how calibrated regulatory frameworks rooted in socio-economic rationality can both fulfil productivity goals and enhance well-being. The article argues that a paradigmatic reconceptualization of India’s white-collar employment law is not merely a constitutional aspiration, but a political-economic necessity, instrumental to upholding human dignity, economic sustainability, and normative coherence in the legal system.

Keywords: Grind culture, labor law violations, law firms, burnout, work-life balance, health risks.

Introduction

“The purpose of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.” – John Locke

The grind culture demands people to work with absolute dedication through extended periods of sacrifice and nonstop effort while following rules which state they must never take breaks and work continuously. The gig economy exists alongside freelance work and delivery services while spreading throughout creative fields such as writing and film and music and professional environments including law firms and banking and consulting and IT companies. “The workplace environment requires employees to work hard but it supports abusive demands which threaten both fair compensation and employee rights and necessary rest periods. (Stauffer, 2023)”. The standard workweek now consists of 50 to 60 hours which leads to “serious health problems including hypertension and heart disease and sleep deprivation and anxiety and depression and sometimes results in death” from excessive work known as “*karoshi*”. Research indicates that extended work hours lead to declining performance levels and lower precision and impaired judgment abilities. Employers gain the ability to avoid paying overtime by categorizing their employees as independent contractors which results in wage theft and unfair compensation for their workforce. “*The International Labour Organization (ILO)*” sets a maximum workweek of 48 hours while requiring employers to provide paid rest breaks to their employees. The practice of working unpaid overtime occurs because workers believe it demonstrates their dedication to the organization although it results in both burnout and exploitation (Sharma, 2024). The examples from the Netherlands and Germany demonstrate that shorter workweeks lead to higher hourly productivity. The enforcement of labor laws needs to become stricter while violations must receive appropriate penalties. Work-

life balance, which promotes creativity, innovation, and long-term success without making people feel bad about taking breaks, ought to be a right rather than a privilege (Wong et al., 2019).

Between Laws and Long Hours

Labour laws function as worker protection systems which stop exploitation through regulated working hours and adequate rest time and safeguarded health standards. The protections which the law provides tend to become ineffective inside corporate law firms because these organizations place their focus on prestige and meeting deadlines and achieving billable targets. Under the “*Indian Shops and Establishments Act*”, most states are required to set out a maximum work period of nine hours daily and forty-eight hours weekly, while also allowing for limited overtime and mandating compensation for any extra hours. “*The Occupational Safety and Health Working Conditions Code (2020)*” establishes an “8-hour daily and 48-hour weekly work time limit to safeguard employee rest periods and workplace safety standards.” The existing work environment continues to support prolonged work shifts which shows the gap between official regulations and real-world office operations. (Working Hours in India, 2025). The legal profession, being highly demanding, often requires junior associates to work 70–80 hours a week—well beyond the legal limit. This is largely driven by competition, client demands, and the pressure to advance quickly in one’s career. While such dedication aims to boost professional growth, it comes at the cost of severe mental and physical strain, frequently resulting in stress-related illnesses and burnout.

Some industries—particularly corporate law firms and the IT sector—illustrate the weak implementation of labour laws in white-collar workplaces. Many companies force young attorneys to work impossibly long hours without overtime compensation by misclassifying them as “*consultants*”, thus avoiding worker safeguards like reasonable pay and limited work hours.. Although the “*Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code, 2020 (OSH Code)*” was introduced to ensure safety, regulate hours, and prevent exploitation, its partial implementation continues to leave professionals exposed to overwork and unfair labour practices. (Sharan & Nande, 2024) One of the objectives of it was to mitigate the violative practices that were exercised against them. Because of improper implementation of the “*OSH code*” professionals, especially in corporate and industrial sectors, face exploitative conditions, such as— Excessive working hours beyond permissible limits, Lack of overtime compensation or proper rest periods and Unsafe or unhealthy working environments due to weak regulatory oversight.

India consolidated 29 labour laws into four codes: the “*Code on Wages, 2019*”; “*the Code on Social Security, 2020*” ; and “*the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020*”. As of 2024–25, their implementation remains pending due to delays in state rules and weak enforcement, leaving workers without the intended protections.

Statement of Problem

The paper focuses on the current system of labor laws in India which is extensive but suffers from being too broad, having conflicting rules, and lacking proper enforcement. Although these laws were created to “protect workers' rights and encourage fair employment practices, many do not match the reality of today's workplaces, especially in the unorganized and gig economies”. The main challenge is to find a balance between worker welfare and industrial

efficiency. It is also crucial to ensure that the new labor code reforms genuinely protect workers rather than just make things easier for employers.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the effectiveness of existing labour laws in safeguarding workers' rights and promoting fair employment practices in India.
- To analyse the impact of recent labour code reforms on labour welfare, industrial relations, and overall compliance mechanisms.

Study Area

The study area outlines the legal provisions of the Labour Laws in India and the practical implications of the same with respect to the economic, and political aspect considering the effect on the workers thereby explaining the gap between the rights and the reality. After gaining independence in 1947, India introduced the “*factories act of 1948*”, designed to regulate working conditions, work hours, and overtime pay. primarily with a focus on the blue collar employees working at the industrial level whereas discarding the white collar employees with the similar benefits (The Factories Act, 1948). Later in the year 1991, with economic liberalisation, it led to rapid development in the corporate sector. This expansion indeed led to rapid growth, but with this, arrived the increasing demand for the skilled professionals, and the employees faced longer working hours without adequate compensation over time. Therefore in order to modernise the recent reforms the Indian government “consolidated 29 labor laws into four major labor codes between 2019 and 2020” (Working 70–90 Hours a Week? Here’s What Indian Labour Laws Say About Overtime, 2025). Despite the fact it still lacks certain measures for strong enforcement. Current situation of the workers in “India is Extreme Work Hours – 12-16 hour workdays, 50+ hour workweeks additionally lack of overtime pay by making employees work extra without compensation leading to mental & physical Burnout because the overwork leads to stress, anxiety, and health issues”. “Therefore, providing minimal legal recourse causing a fear of job loss prevents employees from challenging unfair conditions” (Factories Act, 1948, n.d.).

Reality Check: Labour Law Violations In India

Case Study

An employee of Ernst & Young— An “*Ernst & Young (EY)*” employee from India died in October 2023 from severe stress brought on by work-related demands, highlighting the poisonous overwork culture that is encouraged in many corporate environments. The incident showed that working long hours, being available all the time, and dealing with severe mental stress have already become commonplace under the guise of legal protections. Despite the State's obligation to provide decent and humane working conditions under “*Article 42 of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP)*”, enforcement of this obligation is still lacking. This incident illustrates that while labour law has some provisions, those provisions seldom serve a purpose without a robust enforcement mechanism. Many sectors of the economy – but particularly in our case, corporate sectors – need greater enforcement in their use of work hours, the eradication of non-purposeful employment loopholes, and more substantial enforceable penalties for those who do not comply with their respective labour laws to become supportive of the working person's physical and mental health. (Perayil, 2024).

Overtime Or Overreach? The Legality of Excessive Work Hours

Legal requirements in India are in place to create safe working conditions, preserve fair work duration standards, and provide equal compensation for overtime. The law limits employees' daily and weekly work hours to nine and forty-eight hours, respectively, and requires employers to compensate employees for overtime. The Supreme Court of India established through the “People’s Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India (1982) 3 SCC 235” case that fair wages and dignified working conditions fall under the protection of the “right to life” which defends workers against exploitation. (People’s Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India, 1982) - The Supreme Court held that the violations constituted a denial of fundamental rights under “Article 21”, as the right to life includes the right to live with dignity, which encompasses fair wages and humane working conditions. The court held the state responsible for failing to enforce labor laws and “violating Article 14” by denying equal legal protection to vulnerable workers. The Court ordered the government to make sure that labor laws—which include minimum wage payments, work-hour regulations, and the provision of safe working conditions—are followed.

EY Employee Death: Government Investigates Allegations of Unsafe, Exploitative Work Environment at Audit Firm, (2024).

Junior associates in prestigious law firms for instance are said to work well above the legally accepted limits of, on an average, 60 hours a week and receive no overtime pay, regular rest days, or breaks. Fear of career prospects, and an excessive normalization of work ethic existing in the white collar jobs poses problems on violation of the law because of a mix of employment insecurity .

Sundays No Longer Sacred: The Rise of The 7-Day Workweek

Weekly rest is required by Indian labor laws to avoid burnout and overwork. One day off per week is typically required by the Shops and Establishments Act, which applies to offices, shopping centers, and IT firms. According to the “*Karnataka Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, 1961*”, for example, employees who work on Sundays are entitled to a compensatory day off and cannot be forced to work on Sundays. But many businesses and law firms ignore these protections, forcing workers to work nonstop with little pay or downtime. (Weekend Work and Holiday Norms in India, 2022). “*The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020*” — which is not implemented yet — this protection by mandating one weekly holiday and additional pay for uninterrupted work without breaks. However, in October 2023, Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy a contentious issue arose after Mr. Murthy contested a comment advocating for a 70-hour workweek for young professionals and he reignited the debate about excessive working hours. He argued that “*India's work productivity is one of the lowest in the world. Unless we improve our work productivity... we will not be able to compete with those countries that have made tremendous progress*” (Key Insights on Working Hours in India – 2025, 2025). Infosys founder Narayana Murthy’s call for youth to work 70 hours a week sparked widespread debate. Despite drawing comparisons to post-war Germany and Japan, where long hours aided recovery, critics said his stance ignores workers' mental and physical health. They cautioned that in the absence of just compensation, a balanced workload, and work-life integration, such expectations could lead to burnout rather than productivity. The fundamental question still stands: should India promote growth by

increasing working hours or by enhancing workplace regulations, skill development, and technology to increase productivity in a more sustainable manner?

Public Outcry: The Backlash Against Workplace Exploitation

In October 2023, Infosys founder Narayana Murthy's call for a 70-hour work week to boost India's productivity drew intense public debate. Employees, professionals, and labor rights advocates criticized the idea as unrealistic and exploitative, arguing it would worsen work-life imbalance. Many noted that India already struggles with weak enforcement of labor laws, with professionals—especially in legal, business, and IT sectors—working long hours without fair pay. However, some business leaders, like Ola CEO Bhavish Aggarwal, supported Murthy's view, asserting that India must work harder now to achieve in one generation what other nations accomplished over many. (Is a 90-Hour Work Week Legal in India? Here's What Laws Say, 2025) Others, such as former Tech Mahindra CEO CP Gurnani, maintained that working hard ought to be a personal decision rather than a requirement. Murthy's message, he explained, was not about putting in 70 hours for a company alone, but rather about setting aside time for personal development and the advancement of the country—“work 40 hours for the company and 30 for yourself”. But when L&T Chairman SN Subrahmanyam proposed a 90-hour workweek and acknowledged that he hoped workers could work on Sundays, the argument heated up. His comments were widely criticized for encouraging burnout. Experts pointed to Japan's reformed work culture—once plagued by “*karoshi*” (death by overwork) and “*karojisatsu*” (suicide due to overwork)—as a cautionary example, where extreme hours led to fatal stress, prompting national reforms to protect worker health and productivity (Understanding the 26 Days Minimum Wages Rule in India 2025: Comprehensive Guide, 2025). Japan transitioned from a rigid “*facetime*” culture to a results-based work model, using AI to improve productivity. Companies with over 50 employees must now conduct regular mental health checks, and policies like “*No Overtime Days*” and flexible schedules encourage balance. The 2017 Premium Friday Campaign urged employees to leave early once a month for rest and leisure, though uptake was modest. “*The 2019 Work Style Reform Law*” capped overtime at 45 hours per month (100 in rare cases), mandated five annual paid leave days, and enforced “equal pay for equal work.” This reform-driven shift contrasts India's challenge of balancing growth and worker welfare—prompting reflection on whether long workweeks foster progress or perpetuate exploitation. (New Labour Code 2025: India's Big Shift to a 4-Day Work Week and More, 2025).

The World at Work: Global Stance on Labour Rights

International Labour Organisation (ILO)-

Founded in 1919, the “International Labour Organization (ILO)” is a UN agency that sets global labour standards and promotes fair working conditions. In 2020, the ILO expressed concern over India's labour law amendments in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, where key protections were suspended to boost post-COVID investment (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2022). The ILO warned that extending working hours from 8 to 12 per day and exempting factories from labour laws for up to three years violated international conventions on working hours, safety, and collective bargaining. It noted that India has not ratified the “*Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (C001)*” and “*Commerce and Offices Convention, 1930 (C030)*”, allowing excessive hours in industries like IT and manufacturing. The ILO cautioned that such practices risk worker exploitation, health deterioration, and

gig and informal workers. Need for stronger enforcement of labour rights to prevent exploitation (United Nations General Assembly, 1966).

Long Hour Workweek: Progress Or Exploitation For A Developing India?

No, Not Feasible & Economically Unviable

A workweek beyond the stipulated time is an unsustainable and non practical solution for India's economic growth. Rather than promoting long work weeks, the emphasis should be on productivity, better workplace policies and fair remuneration, promoting a highly productive and healthy workforce (Pencavel, 2017). The necessary condition for economic growth is smart work, not heavy work. It is unrealistic and detrimental to India's economic growth. The study concluded that with more than 50 hours of work, productivity significantly decreased and was associated with more errors, inefficiencies and fatigue (Gernert et al., 2024), particularly in India which has poor labor protections. It would also undermine workers' physical and mental well-being, as well as lead to more work-related stress. To increase efficiency and work-life balance, developed countries like Germany and Japan are cutting back on working hours. To achieve sustainable economic improvement, India should prioritize automation, skill development, and workplace efficiency above longer hours. Real growth is driven by smart work, not overwork.

Suggestions

"The *Karnataka Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, 1961*" and the "*Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020*" cap working hours at nine per day and forty-eight per week, mandating rest periods and overtime pay. Yet, law firms bypass these safeguards by labelling junior lawyers as "*consultants*," stripping them of rights to fair hours, safety, and compensation—breaching the Constitution's Articles 14, 19,(1)(g), and 21. In order to solve this, consultants should be legally granted "employee" status, which would include set working hours, enforceable audits and fines of ₹50,000 per infraction, a weekly billable cap of 50 hours in accordance with Bar Council regulations, and anonymous reporting procedures. Learning from Germany's reduced-hour models and "*Japan's Work Style Reform*", such reforms—especially after the 2023 EY overwork tragedy—are essential to curb burnout, ensure dignity, and sustain legal practice.

Global Experts Speak: Why a Workweek Beyond the Said Hours is Unsustainable for India

Stanford University (2014) – Falling Productivity After 50 Hours

"An individual who works more than fifty hours per week experiences a sharp decline in productivity per hour". Productivity drops so much after 55 hours that it would be pointless to add more. Stanford University's John Pencavel (Pencavel, 2014).

WHO & ILO (2021) – Health Risks of Overwork

"Working 55 or more hours per week is a serious health hazard, increasing the risk of stroke by 35% and heart disease by 17%." – World Health Organization & International Labour Organization

OECD – More Hours ≠ More Productivity

"The nations with the highest hourly productivity are those with the shortest average workweeks, such as Germany and the Netherlands. OECD Report on Productivity and Work Hours (World Health Organization & International Labour Organization, 2021)

It is both unreasonable and exploitative for law firms to impose excessive working hours. Despite the profession's demanding nature, long hours do not enhance productivity or client outcomes; instead, they lead to burnout, declining work quality, and high attrition. Many top Indian law firms require associates to work weekends, remain on call, and sacrifice personal time—often under the guise of “consultant” status to evade labour protections under the “*Shops and Establishments Act*”, which limits work to 48–50 hours weekly. The lack of regulated rest periods and overtime pay worsens the issue. In contrast, The leading markets, such as the US and the UK, are starting to combat lawyer burnout by implementing flexible schedules, capped billable hours, and mental health initiatives. If the Indian legal sector continues allowing overwork to be normalized, we will begin to see talent attrition, decreased productivity, and instability in the long term. Hence, firms must prioritise balanced workloads, fair pay structures, and humane work expectations—ensuring justice not only for clients but also for their own workforce (Pencavel, 2014).

Talking About the Jr. Lawyer as Consultants Making Them Get Away from the Conventional Legal Norms—

In many Indian law firms, junior associates are often hired under the title of “consultants,” this hiring is done in order to avoid the legal obligations that come with regular employment. However, the Supreme Court of India in the case of “*Dharangadhara Chemical Works Ltd v. State of Saurashtra (1957)* (Dharangadhara Chemical Works Ltd. v. State of Saurashtra, 1957) made it clear that what determines a person's employment status is not the job title, but the real nature of the work relationship”. The Court laid down three important tests that ensures that if the below conditions are satisfied then the person can be considered as an employee no matter what the contract states (1) Who controls the work, (2) Whether the work is full-time or casual, and (3) Whether the person is integrated into the organisation.

In company setups, employment contracts clearly define subordination and benefits — for example: “You are employed full-time as an associate from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM, Monday to Saturday,” along with clauses on paid leave (15 days) and reporting duties like “You will report to your team leader or partner.” These terms create control, exclusivity, and subordination, which are hallmarks of an employer-employee type relationship. On the other hand, consultant agreements will phrase things in a way that suggests independence, using language such as “You are retained as an independent consultant,” “You are free to work on a flexible basis,” “No paid leave will apply,” and “You may pursue other projects.” However, if in practice the consultant works full-time, follows office timings, and reports to seniors, courts may treat them as employees under the principle in *Dharangadhara Chemical Works Ltd. v. State of Saurashtra (1957)*.

Hence, disguised consultancy contracts created to evade labour law compliance — denying benefits like PF, ESI, gratuity, and regulated work hours — may be deemed sham contracts and struck down by courts for misclassification.

Research Methodology: Material And Methods

The paper includes both primary and secondary resources of information, primary resources through. Legal texts of the Labour Law Act, Supreme Court petitions, rulings, and government white papers as well as notifications and secondary resources through archives, books, journal articles, websites and newspaper articles are used to design the structural arguments. The method of comparative analysis of legal documents, media reports, and expert opinions have

been implied. This approach helps assess the legal and social implications of the grind culture in the law firms. Thereby the Qualitative research carried out here lies in stress finding out the meanings, concepts, definitions and description of events that have taken place via phenomenology, grounded theory and case study.

Results and Discussions

The results show significant gaps in the legal sector's research and regulations in India. By designating associates as "consultants," law firms frequently get around labor laws such as the Shops and Establishments Act. The lack of formal billable-hour or overtime regulations permits overwork to continue unchecked, and there is a dearth of empirical data on burnout or work hours in Indian companies.

Unveiling The Void: Identifying Gaps in Labour Law Research

There are important study gaps that require more study notwithstanding current labor legislation and increased awareness of burnout in law firms:

1. Inadequate Implementation of Labor Laws in Legal Firms - In order to avoid legal scrutiny, law firms hire colleagues as "consultants" rather than full-time workers, evading legislation like the "Shops and Establishments Act" that restrict working hours. This gap has not been the subject of any significant research or court cases.
2. Absence of data on burnout and work hours in law firms specific to India - There is a lack of empirical research on the consequences of long work hours on mental health, job performance, and attrition in India, despite studies from the US, UK, and Japan highlighting the detrimental effects of extreme work cultures (Quikchex, 2025).
3. Indian law firms lack structured billable hour regulations. Unregulated overwork results from Indian law companies' unclear standards about maximum working hours, required rest times, and overtime compensation, in contrast to Western firms that cap billable hours (L&E Global, n.d.).

Recent Development: The Hidden Cost of Overwork Crisis in Indian Law Firms

A 2023 study shows that 27% of employees working in major Indian firms experience burnout. Senior female managers show a 5% higher burnout rate than their male counterparts in these organizations. The staff at top Indian law firms experience toxic work conditions which include excessive workloads and insufficient pay and mandatory extended work hours without compensation. The business world has developed a competitive atmosphere which makes exhaustion normal while destroying people's mental health. A leading law firm launched a nine-day "rejuvenation break" in 2021 to support work-life balance because burnout rates had become a major concern. The public dispute between two lawyers regarding the number of hours each works in 2024 reversed the clock on the necessary conversation of less-than-ideal work conditions in light of our metaphorical discussions. The cases make it apparent that Indian law firms have to quickly start actively managing work distribution while developing equitable work schedules or shifts and prioritizing staff well-being to retain their productivity and workforce capacity (India Today, 2024).

Kerala Passes Landmark Right to Disconnect Bill 2025: New Recommendations Aim to Strengthen Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-Being—

By allowing employees to ignore work-related calls or messages after hours, the Kerala Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 aims to protect their personal time. It tackles overwork and burnout

resulting from permanent digital connectivity, facilitating improved work-life balance and mental health.

Key Provisions and Framework-

The Kerala Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 provides workers in the private sector the ability to decline work-related calls, emails, or messages outside of regular work hours, without any consequence. The bill sets up district grievance committees consisting of labour officers to resolve complaints in relation to these provisions and requires companies to implement internal policies and counselling systems to limit overworking and support mental wellness (ETimes.in, 2025).

Effectiveness and Anticipated Impact

The Kerala Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 plans to protect employee mental health through its leadership of healthy work environments which allows staff to disconnect from work-related communications after their scheduled work hours without any negative repercussions. The policy functions to enhance organizational performance while boosting employee satisfaction and staff retention through its method of preventing workplace exhaustion and burnout. The policy functions to enhance organizational performance while boosting employee satisfaction and staff retention through its method of preventing workplace exhaustion and burnout. The bill also boosts Kerala's reputation as a forward-looking worker-friendly state, conforming to international best practices. But successful implementation—particularly in flexible industries such as IT and startups—will need to be accompanied by sharp definitions of working hours, rigorous enforcement, and sensitization programs to battle fears of being perceived as "uncommitted" for not responding outside working hours.

Comparative Global Study

Kerala's Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 joins an international trend of legislation such as France's 2017 El Khomri Law, Spain's 2018 Workers' Statute, and Italy's Jobs Act 2017, all of which protect employees' right to disconnect outside of work. These have decreased burnout, bettered mental health, and increased productivity by establishing boundaries on after-hours communication. Similarly, Germany and Belgium have utilized work-life balance through company policies and state legislation. Kerala's bill takes cue from these best practices and safeguards workers against disciplinary action for disconnecting, sets up grievance committees, and supports healthy workplace reforms. If enforced, it has the potential to establish a national benchmark for humane productivity-based labour reforms respecting mental well-being and digital boundaries as part of contemporary work ethics. (IndiaLaw Blog, 2025).

Conclusion

With "50–60 hour workweeks without overtime or breaks, grind culture in Indian law firms is violative of labor laws and "Articles 14, 19(1)(g), and 21". Ignoring claims such as Murthy's that overwork leads to success, overloading colleagues with the label "consultants" adds to burnout. Germany and Japan show that reasonable hours enhance production. A sustainable legal career and the dignity of lawyers rely on controlling billable hours, observing the law, and fostering mental well-being.

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