



## IMPORTANCE OF CONSUMERISM TOWARDS SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

*Consumption is an essential part of daily life and its benefits as well as deficiencies are crucial to the quality of every one's life. We find today that modern business is being described as Consumer Oriented. A consumer is regarded as the sovereign of all marketing efforts. Sovereign, because an economic vote is cast every time a consumer purchases and it is through this vote that he is said to define both production and consumption. Sadly, however, this glorified position accorded to the consumer is true in theory only. All of us are consumers. Wherever we live and whatever we do, irrespective of age, sex, caste, colour or creed, makes us a consumer. Being a consumer, we purchase and use goods produced by other members of the society. And certainly each of us, as a consumer, has experienced the cumulative frustration associated with the products that don't conform to expected quality or standard. Many times a consumer faces frustration during purchase and consumption of the product. In reality, consumer is treated as a non-entity and taken for granted with impunity. Rather than, dictating what is to be produced, he is made to accept what is produced. The consumer at the best is a puppet in the hands of businessmen and one most centrifugal element in the circle of investment, production, sale and consumption. Further, he is mercilessly harassed, misguided and exploited by the unscrupulous elements who see nothing beyond self gain.*

### **Introduction**

Exploitation as a phenomenon carries within itself the seeds of protest, which usually culminate into liberation of the oppressed. Consumerism, it may be said, is the resultant protest movement against consumer exploitation'. It is a broad social movement that identifies, publicizes and tries to correct consumer problems. Consumerism is a social movement of consumers that has come into existence to educate and unite consumers to fight for protection of their rights. It strives to provide joint efforts against unfair business practices like adulteration, unfair pricing, misleading advertisement, hoarding, black marketing, shortage in weights and measures, etc. Consumerism aims at producing and marketing of goods that are more consumer oriented. Hence consumer movement is a movement of consumers by the consumers and for the consumers' protection and welfare.

Consumerism is an outcry against a blunt social conscience of businessmen, which has resulted in consumer exploitation. It is the advocacy of the adoption and implementation of the marketing conception by business and a demand for the adoption of marketing practices that are more informative and responsive. In effect, it seems to render the adopt 'Caveat Emptor' superfluous and unwarranted. Consumerism is an attempt to redress the imbalance between producers' rights vis-à-vis those employed by the consumers. While the producers enjoy the right to design, distribute, advertise and price the product, the consumers enjoy only the right of not buying it. Businessmen, however, by resorting to information manipulations, seldom allow the exercise of even this right. Consumerism attempts to correct this unpleasant situation by augmenting the rights of the consumers. It seeks the recognition and assertion of following consumer rights.

### **Consumer Rights**

The following can be said as consumer rights:

1. The right to be informed about the quality, quantity, potency, purity, standard and price of goods or services with a view to protection the consumer against unfair trade practices. This is very significant right of consumers, as it makes consumer well informed and vigilant. The adequate information is very important in order to make a right choice of goods and services. Now, the Supreme Court has designated this legal right as a fundamental right of the consumer within the purview of Article 19 (1) (a), 21 and 25 of the constitution.
2. The right to choose. The right to be assured wherever possible, access to a variety of goods at competitive prices. Fair and effective competition in the market must be encouraged so as to provide consumers with the widest range of products and the services at the reasonable price.
3. The right to safety. The right to be protected against the marketing of goods which are hazardous to life and property. Traders must ensure that goods are safe for users. In case of hazardous goods, they give clear instructions as to mode of use and the risk involved and vital safety information is conveyed to consumers.
4. The right to be heard. The right to be assure that consumers' interest will receive due considerations at appropriate forums in the formulation and execution of economic policy.
5. The right to redress. The right to redress against unfair trade practices and exploitation. This right has been ensured by establishing three tier system of consumer Fora. The right to consumer education. The right to consumer education, i.e. the right to acquire knowledge and skills required to be an informed consumer.



6. The right to a healthy environment. The right to a physical environment that will enhance the quality of life.
7. The right to basic needs. The right to have basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing and basic services in order to maintain a minimum level of quality of life.

The above rights have been compiled by International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU). But rights and responsibilities being the two faces of the same coin; the IOCU, now known as Consumer International (CI) has also drafted certain consumer responsibilities which are listed below -

### **Consumer Responsibilities**

The following can be said as consumer responsibilities:

1. Critical Awareness – To be alert about the goods and services they use.
2. Action – To act on fair and just demands.
3. Social Responsibilities - To be concerned about impact of their consumption behaviour on other citizens.
4. Environmental Awareness – To be sensitive about what their consumption of goods does to the environment and not to waste natural resources.
5. Solidarity – To act together through the formulation of consumer groups which have the strength and influence to promote consumer interest.

In India, consumerism encompasses the evolving set of activities of the government, business enterprises and independent organizations that are designed to protect the rights and interest of consumers. In due course consumer movement has become a socio-economic movement, which seeks to protect the interest of the consumers against the unfair trade practices adopted by the traders.

Encarta Dictionary explains consumerism as

- a) Protection of Consumer Rights: The protection of the rights and interest of consumers especially with regards to price, quality and safety.
- b) Materialistic Attitude (disapproving): An attitude that values the acquisition of material goods.
- c) Economic Belief in Benefits of Consumption: The economic belief states that the buying and selling of large quantity of goods is beneficial to economy or a sign of economic strength.

The word consumerism has become common place and its meanings have become the subject of differing opinions and periodic reinterpretations. From our point of view, obviously, the first explanation is more relevant.

### **Evolution of Consumerism at Abroad & India Historical Perspective**

Consumerism is as old as man, who did not know then how to produce, but was endowed with plenty by Mother Nature, to discover, use and consume. The ancient consumer moved from place to place to hunt for food. He ate whatever he could find such as fruits, nuts, berries, sweet roots and the flesh of animals. He made use of wood and dry leaves from forests to make fire to keep him warm and also to tenderize the meat he hunted. It was purely by accident that man discovered that food can be grown by sowing seeds. This marked the beginning of man as a producer. Many such discoveries followed as he began to satisfy more of his needs with the resources around him. However, he needed to stay at one place to look after his produce. Gradually, he realized that he could not manage production on his own. So, he began to socialize and take the help of others around him. This led to group living which resulted in sharing of goods with others and exchange of services.

As a result, in the beginning of civilization man would get things of his need by exchange of commodities (Barter System), but as he became aware of his surroundings, he also started his own production. He not only did restrict himself to his production but also started learning the advantages of other commodities. A few decades ago, households used to grow their own food partly or wholly, buying only a few products, the quality of which they could judge fairly well, with their age old practices and experience in various fields.

Industrialization and technological development brought in its wake, a number of efforts which have completely changed the face of the market and the consumer environment. With change in society, industrial development took place, due to this not only did industry come up but even the number of cities and towns went up. This brought about employment facilities and marketing methods were established. The coming up of an advanced technologies brought about low production cost and also specialization of commodities. In this industrial race, producers almost forgot the consumers and went on multiplying the production.



With technologies and advertisement racing far ahead of literacy, the consumer is faced with an array of products from which he has plenty to choose, but is unable to make proper choices. External attraction of package, label, size and shape has overtaken quality and the value they provide for money. Each process has pushed up the prices to levels unaffordable by the majority. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century producers became more concerned with introducing new commodities and paid no heed to providing information to consumers, which resulted in their becoming ignorant and unaware. Consequently, consumer associations took birth in the developed countries mainly in Europe and United States. Thus Consumerism is the legacy of the industrial revolution. Consumerism and concern for the consumer and their rights peaked broadly in three periods – a. the early 1900's, b. the depression years of 1930's c. the 1960's and 1970's and d. the progressive era of 1980's

The concept of Consumerism can be traced back to Adam Smith. Adam Smith clearly pointed out flaws in capitalism (i.e. it is a way to regulate the selfish passions instead of welfare of consumer, it leads to welfare among producers and which entails intrinsic costs and mounting wastages of competition, which have fuelled the fire for today's quest for consumer rights. The doctrine "Caveat Emptor" (Let the buyer beware) is the pivot of consumerism. Buyer's awareness is the root cause of the attention to consumer protection.

The United States has been the leader in Consumerism in the world since consumers therein first began to recognise that they had rights in market place. Perhaps this awareness dates back to the Boston Tea Party in 1773 in which American patriots boarded British ships and tossed incoming tea chests in sea, in protest against unfair taxes. It is noted that some consumer groups existed in the United States as early as the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The formation of National Consumer League in 1899 was the indication of the growing strength of the consumer movement.

#### **a) The Early 1900's**

In the early 1900's, increasing industrialization and completion of national network of railroads created an opportunity for new markets; business enterprises started to advertise and sell their products nationwide. As food companies and meat packers began to centralize their operations and used refrigerated railroad cars to ship their products, the medical profession, the press and various private groups became increasingly concerned about the unsanitary conditions, under which food was processed and about the dangers of preservatives and dyes used in these processed foods. In 1906 the American author Upton Sinclair in his novel "The Jungle" exposed the filthy conditions in meat packing plants of Chicago (U.S.A.). This caused a public outcry and American Congress was forced to pass pure food and drug legislation and order for meat inspection. Food and drug safety was also a major concern in the years of the Great Depression. It culminated in the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906), the Meat Inspection Act (1906) and the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission (1914). Until mid 1920s the consumer movement consisted mainly of sporadic local activities. The second phase of American consumer movement in the mid 1930s was fanned by various factors. The ideological background of the growth of consumer movement was provided by a series of writing, beginning with R.H.Tawney's "Acquisitive Society" followed by T. Veblen's "Theory of Leisured Class" and, more especially, the joint work of Stuart Chase and F. J. Flinch's "Your Money's Worth" crystallized wide spread consumer discontent.

#### **b) The Depression Years of 1930's**

During 1930's, consumerism started getting maximum consumer attention resulting in understanding of the phenomenon. Research work then began to be devoted to this field and thus came the evolution of the concept of consumerism.

#### **c) The 1960s and 1970's**

The third wave of consumerism was started in 1960's. E. B. Weiss and other observed that this period has attributed consumer unrest to rising public standards of business conduct and social responsibility, brought about, by increasing education and sophistication. Reinforcing and interacting with current consumer unrest, there were a number of books. Galbraith's "The Affluent Society", Jessica Mitford's "American Way of Death" and "Srlent Spring" by Rachel Corson's brought out the topics with regard to environmental pollution and use of chemicals in food items. In 1962 John F. Kennedy proposed new programmes to protect public as well as improve the existing rights. The late President of the United States said in a special message to Congress, on the protection of consumers, that they have certain definite and basic rights-

1. The Right to Safety: Provides for protection against goods which are hazardous to health and life.
2. The Right to be Informed: The right to be informed provides for protection against fraudulent or misleading information, advertising, labeling or other practices and to be given the facts the consumer needs to make informed choice.
3. The Right to choose: The right to choose assures, wherever possible, the access to a variety of products and services at competitive prices and assurance of satisfactory quality and service at fair prices.



4. The Right to be heard: The right to be heard assures that consumer interests will receive full and sympathetic consideration in the formulation of Government policy and fair and expeditious treatment in its administrative tribunals.

In U.S.A. Ralph Nadar fought an unrelenting and successful battle for the rights of the consumers. His name is a household word in that country. He is popularly called Consumer Gandhi. With the publication of his book on the automobile industry "Unsafe at any speed" (1965) Ralph Nadar emerged as the leader of a wide range of reform efforts. The book revolutionaries safety standards all over the world. Under his leadership, many young people engaged themselves in research, writing and lobbying to improve consumer protection. In his book, he meticulously documented that many auto deaths were due to faulty car design rather than faulty driving. The major gains on behalf of consumers were effected during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

#### **d) The Progressive Era of 1980's**

Increasing industrialization and competition of national network of railroad created an opportunity for few markets; business started to advertise and sell their products nationwide. Ford companies, Meat Packers, Medical Professionals, the Press and various private groups become increasingly concerned about the unsanitary conditions under which food was processed and about the dangers of preservatives and dyes used in the processed food. The growth in organized consumer activities in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's resulted in the passage of vital consumer laws in the U.S.

#### **Consumerism in India**

The history of consumer movement in India is as old as human civilization. It emerged as a reaction to exploitation by businessmen. Nevertheless we have to realize that the entity called 'Grahak' is ancient in India but was identified variously from time to time. In "Kautilya Arth Shastra" Chanakya laid down clear and detailed rules and procedures for the protection of consumers' interests. According to the "Arthashastra", it was the duty of the government to supervise sales products at reasonable rates. Merchants, who cheated or generally interfered with the normal functioning of market prices, were subject to heavy punishment. The scripture "Grahak Devo Bhava" was an important foundation of our ancient economic system. Hence, consumer movement is not a western thought. There appears to be no need for us to borrow any 'dogma' or 'outmoded rules' for the wheels of the consumers' empire to function.

In 1934 Mahatma Gandhi, highlighting the importance of consumers in business said: "A consumer is the most important visitor in our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are depending on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is a part of it. We are not doing a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so."

Pre-Independence times saw early freedom fighters like Sri. Tangetri Prakasm and Raajaji (1940s), who had protected consumers from middlemen by starting consumer co-operative stores to retail essential commodities. C. Rajagopalachariji, in fact, even established Consumer Protection Council in the year 1950. The Chinese war brought forth the harsh realities of consumer exploitation witnessed in acts such as unfair price increases, black marketing and hoarding. This led citizens in Delhi and Bombay to organize price resistance movements and demand an effective public distribution system to cater the needs of the economically weak.

In Mixed Economy of countries like India, firstly, in the name of encouraging local producers, the government imposes restrictions and controls on production and distribution of commodities, thereby creating shortages and high prices that consumers are required to pay. Secondly, some major items of interest to consumers reserved for the public sector undertakings which have a clout with government and political leaders and are not bothered about consumers & their complaints.

Indian consumer has traditionally been a conveniently forgotten factor. Whether he pays a fair price for his goods and services, they including the consumer himself, are all ignored by everyone. In short, he has always been the beggar rather than the chooser in the market place. The first formal consumer movement was started in 1949 by a Gandhian disciple in Madras. Thereafter two important events could be said to have established the Modern Consumer Movement in India. One of these being the establishment of Consumer Guidance Society of India (CGSI) (1966) by some enlightened housewives, who inspired by the Consumer Rights Bill passed by American President, John F. Kennedy, decided to fight the menace of consumer exploitation tooth and nail. Similarly under the able leadership of Late Shri. J.R.D. Tata and Shri. Rama Krishna Bajaj, some progressive businessmen came together and formed the Fair Trade Practices Association (Bombay, March 1966) to help consumers get a fair deal.



The year 1973 is a landmark year for the Indian Consumer Movement. The price fluctuations during this year and its accompanying crippling effects suppressed citizens to establish over 50 consumer organizations. At the same time, in Mumbai, consumer movement took off with strong vigour. In 1975, a group of vigilant consumers came together to establish voluntary association viz. Mumbai Grahak Panchayat. The team of consumers was led by a social activist, also a renowned singer, Late Shri. Sudhir Phadke. This team of consumers realized that in order to halt consumer exploitation and to enhance consumer movement in Mumbai, uniting of the consumers together was very much essential. As such, they started distribution of essential items through Mumbai Grahak Panchayat and provided a forum to consumers to come together have a dialogue, interact and solve their problems on their own.

In the meanwhile, in 1984 to be precise, young Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India. He held the issue of consumers close to his heart. His concern was visible, when he amended his late mother and Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's 20-Point Programme to include consumer protection along with strengthening of the public distribution system. Point no. 17 of this programme reads : Expand the public distribution system through more fair price shops and make available to students text books and exercise books on a priority basis and to promote a strong consumer protection movement. The State Government has taken up this issue at present. However, the situation proved that to accomplish this objective only government decision is not sufficient, but its effective implementation and proper follow -up is essential; otherwise it would create chaos in the entire system. Consumer organizations, in due course, started campaigning for a comprehensive legislation to protect consumer interests. Their demand received impetus in 1984; the United Nations Organization passed some guidelines on consumer protection and requested member countries to enact suitable consumer protection legislation based on these guidelines. This led to the enactment of the Consumer Protection Act 1986, which has brought about remarkable changes in the field of consumer protection.

The consumer movement, although slow to strike roots in India, has over the years assumed a definite functional shape. The consumer organizations, pro-consumer legislations and pro- consumer media have all together enabled to create consumer awareness, to educate and protect consumer interest and to redress their grievances in order to strengthen the consumer movement. The next chapters are, therefore, devoted to understand these consumer related issues.

### **Importance of Consumerism**

This is dealt with in two viewpoints - in general and in particular to a specific segment of society- Consumers, Government & Business.

### **Indian Consumer**

Consumerism is a movement to satisfy consumers. The motto of consumer satisfaction is to halt consumer exploitation through consumer movement. Individuals serve or work for which they earn or receive an income. As consumers, the individuals use their income to satisfy their wants and needs and in the process, acquire certain goods and services. At times, consumer may also does some savings out of his present income, thereby, sacrificing the present enjoyment to some future date.

In an individual's role as a consumer, or user, for his income, he has to make certain decisions regarding spending, borrowing and investing. When individuals decide to spend a part or whole of their income, they do so to satisfy their wants by acquiring goods and services. Consumers spend crores of rupees every day to meet their requirements. Consumers are the biggest spenders in the economy. Within its life time a family might easily spend half a million rupees. When families spend money to satisfy their wants, they are happy and the people who sell things are also happy. As a result of sustained high level spending, the economy operates at a higher level.

When the individuals postpone their spending, they keep their income aside as savings, thereby consuming less than what they had earned. On the other hand, when individuals decide to borrow money, they consume more than their income at the present time. This makes the individual to consume less later on since some of his future income may have to be used to pay back the borrowed money. Through savings, an individual postpones his consumption in order to consume more later on or to have greater financial security. When consumer spends more, he consumes more to satisfy his wants postponing savings. The consumers also pay taxes to the government for the benefit of enjoyment of an improved environment and better services. However, instead of getting satisfaction, many a times, consumers are getting exploited by government and enterprises, which stress upon the importance of consumer movement.

### **Importance of Consumerism to Consumer**

**a. Awareness:** Consumerism is essential to create awareness and consciousness amongst the consumers about consumer rights, common trade practices and redressal systems. Generally in India, consumers are not fully aware of their rights and those who are aware are not in a position to exercise these rights. As such, it is necessary to create awareness among



consumers about not only their rights but also about the ways in which he/she can exercise these rights. It is, basically, consumer guidance which is extended with the help of books, pamphlets, films and T.V. programmes, newspapers articles and columns, lectures and special courses. This highlights the importance of consumerism in our country. It is necessary to publish unfair practices followed by businessmen in order to make consumer conscious and be aware of.

- b. Protection:** Hazardous products, unfair trade practices and restrictive trade practices, prevailing in the marketing, hamper the interests of the consumers. It is necessary to enact the legislative rules, regulations, laws to protect consumers against these unfair trade practices which are the prime objective of consumer movement. Only enactments of laws are not sufficient to protect consumers but its effective implementation is also equally important. Consumerism is a significant movement aimed to halt the exploitation of consumers and pivot the position of consumer in a competitive market. Government has established certain regulatory authorities in different fields for the purpose. A strong movement on the part of consumers is essential to keep these authorities vigilant and active for protecting and promoting consumer interest.
- c. Education:** The root cause of consumer sufferings is mainly lack of information, education to consumer. Due to the complexities of science and technology, new complex products, electronic gadgets are entering in the market on a large scale. The distribution system, promotional techniques and marketing strategies are changing at a very fast pace. It is necessary to educate the consumers about the various facets and effects of these developments in various fields and systematized planned educational programmes are essential to protect and promote consumer welfare which states the importance of consumerism. There is a strong need to make use of different tools, medias to educate, literate as well as illiterate consumers. The cultural programmes, kirtan, pravachan, based on consumerism could be arranged in this regard. This can't be achieved within one or two days. The sustained efforts are essential to develop mindset of individuals for getting them educated as a vigilant consumer. Even business community has realized the need for Consumer Education. Shri. Ashok Desai, Chairman, Matek pointed out that as changes are happening at a blistering pace and products are getting complicated, there is an absolute need to educate consumers.
- d. Vigilant:** In a globalised economy cut-throat competition exists in the market. In order to stabilize, in such a keen competition, the marketers are tempted to follow unfair trade practices. In our country, consumers are not in a position to differentiate between fair trade practices and unfair trade practices. Moreover, the consumers who realize the existence of unfair trade practices, very rarely protest against it. According to well-known Consumer Activist M.R.Pai, "When a consumer gets a raw deal by way of shady goods or poor service, the tendency is to grumble and forget about it. What is worse is the 'Jaane do' mentality, which is all pervasive and which has made the average consumer the worst enemy of the consumer movement. In order to protest against exploitation of the consumers and to generate public opinion through the media against untruly market behaviour and unfair trade practices, growth of consumer movement has become a need of an hour. This includes organisation campaigns and public protests.
- e. Unity:** One of the important root cause of consumer exploitation is unorganized and scattered consumers. The law of universe states that 'Unity is strength'. As such a strong movement is essential to unite consumers and organise them to protest their exploitation, hampering of interests. The consumer movement is important to create and encourage the promotion of strong and motivated consumer organizations to work at the local, regional and national level, to educate and guide consumers and undertake consumer courses.

#### **Importance of Consumerism to the Government**

- a) Liaison:** It is necessary to inform and brief the government about consumer demands, problems and grievances, so as to enable the government to act in consumer interest. A consumer movement supported by enlightened and professional representatives who can maintain proper liaison between consumers and the government.
- b) Legislation:** It is required to urge the government to formulate and enact consumer legislation and economic measures, to enable the government protect consumer interest. The consumer associations / organizations are required to be established by consumers to represent, on behalf of consumers, the government authorities so as to frame proper consumer protection laws and other measures. It is also essential to update, modify these laws and legislative measures as per changing environment. This is particularly important in our country, where absence of effective laws encourages the import of dangerous or ineffective products from developed countries, where the sale of these products might even have been banned. In order to protect the consumers, government controls are not only sufficient. Effective laws, legislation, new and amended regulations, ensuring compliance from manufacturers are needed. Imposing of penalties for violations, which can help consumers to find the solutions for their problems, is also most essential.



- c) **Regulations:** The regulatory authorities, consumer agencies are to be set-up to act as a watchdog of consumer interest. These agencies' prime objective should be to see that the consumer protection laws are efficiently implemented and to defend consumer causes which generally come to the buyer's rescue.
- d) **Promotion of Plans and Policies:** While promoting plans and policies, pertaining to various sectors, government has to give prime importance to consumerism which can make the state and central government more responsive to consumer interest, prompt it to take necessary statutory measures and make the required institutional arrangements to safeguard consumer rights.

#### Importance to Business

- a) **Feedback:** Consumerism can provide feedback for the business. It enables entrepreneurs to understand consumer needs and demands. This will assist in the more effective implementation of the marketing concept or the societal marketing concept, depending upon the nature of consumerism.
- b) **Focused Consumers:** Consumerism is essential to make businesses think differently and to place consumer and consumer satisfaction well above their profits. While setting the objectives, formulating plans, strategies, consumer interest has to be the prime concern in business activities and organizations. A customer-oriented approach is required to be developed among business community.
- c) **Opportunities:** Consumerism is an opportunity for honest and dynamic business houses. It pinpoints the consumer expectations as well as faults, defects or problematic areas of business activities. As such, the businessmen are able to enlist the support of consumers by minimizing the imperfections on the production or distribution front. As stated by Peter Drucker, "Consumerism actually should be, must be and I hope will be the opportunity of marketing. This is what we, in marketing, have been waiting for."
- d) **Fair Trade Practices:** Consumerism can encourage traders and manufacturers to adopt honest, fair and responsible market practices, so as to enable them to act in the interest of the consumer and his welfare.
- e) **Code of Conduct:** Consumerism indirectly helps businesses to organize themselves into groups and associations. In turn, these associations develop code of conduct in the market place, as well as to control market practices. Consumerism is significant for strict enforcement of such code of conduct. Consumer movement aims at exerting a pressure on businessmen and makes them more socially responsible.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the recommendations given, if adopted properly, would not only protect consumer interest and welfare but also strengthen the consumer movement in India. In fact such endeavours will certainly prove effective in getting consumers awarded with real status of the "King".

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