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Delimitation, Malapportionment, and Federal Equity: The Political Economy of Representation in India

by

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Abstract

This paper discusses how representational asymmetries and fiscal distribution relate in a federal system with reference to the case of India. It theorises malapportionment, which is the difference between the proportion of a state in the legislature and the proportion of the state in the population, as an institutional characteristic with possible distributive implications. The analysis uses a state-level panel dataset covering the period 2014-2024 to examine the hypothesis that overrepresentation has an impact on per capita central transfers and whether this effect is conditional on political alignment between state and central governments. The empirical results answer two questions. As for the impact of overrepresentation on fiscal transfers, the results of the baseline specifications are quite striking: states with a higher representation in Lok Sabha than their population share get much more in per capita transfers from the centre. This direct effect is reduced in size and becomes statistically insignificant when state and year fixed effects are added, suggesting that much of the variation is captured by the time-invariant state characteristics and common temporal shocks. Second, on the conditionality of this effect on political alignment: the interaction between malapportionment and political alignment is positive and statistically significant, indicating that representational advantages lead to measurable fiscal benefits when the state government is aligned with the Union government. These findings together indicate that institutional representation and partisan proximity are both important determinants of fiscal outcomes in Indian federalism.

Keywords

federalism, delimitation, malapportionment, political representation, fiscal federalism, India



1. Introduction

The allocation of political authority and representation within territorial units are the basic issues of the federal systems. One of the foundational beliefs of democratic federalism is that, when it comes to representation in national legislatures, the distribution of population should be reflected widely, therefore, making political equality within and without the national borders. Nonetheless, this principle is often compromised by institutional decisions that ensure that competing interests like territorial equity, minority protection, and political stability are balanced. Representation in federations tends to be non-proportional to population, leading to different magnitudes of malapportionment of constituent units (Lijphart, 1999; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). This is not always the case, however. Where there is constitutionally required regular redistricting and strong judicial enforcement of equal representation, like the United States after *Baker v. Carr* (1962) and *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964), or Australia and Canada with independent electoral commissions that redraw districts after each census, there is generally a close relationship between population and seats in lower houses. The deviation from proportionality is greatest in federal systems where territorial and political factors are more important than the strict principle of demographic equity in seat distribution (Samuels and Snyder, 2001; Rodden, 2006).

Malapportionment, the imbalance between the proportion of legislative seats in a region and the proportion of the population, has been a popular subject of comparative politics, especially in the area of electoral systems and democracy. Studies indicate that malapportionment may cause distortion of policy outcomes, bias in resource distribution and systematic benefit of some regions or political groups (Peltzman, 1976; Persson and Tabellini, 2003). These distortions in federal systems take on a new dimension: they transform the balance of power between the subnational units and the central government and hence affect intergovernmental bargaining and fiscal federalism. Nonetheless, malapportionment as an electoral or legislative concern has been widely discussed in the literature, and not as a structural aspect of federal design.

This dynamic can be especially interesting to analyze in the context of India. After the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, India placed a freeze on the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, basing representation on the population figures as at the 1971



Census. This freeze was subsequently extended to 2026 by the Constitution (Eighty-Fourth Amendment) Act, 2001, which amended Articles 82 and 170(3) of the Constitution to defer delimitation until the first census conducted after 2026. This move aimed to encourage the states that managed to lower fertility rates to not lose political representation. Although this policy is normatively justified based on the grounds of development, it has contributed to a growing disparity in the number of population shares and seat shares across states with time (McMillan, 2008).

The existing literature on delimitation in India has focused mainly on the legal and administrative aspects of delimitation. The powers and procedures of the Delimitation Commission (McMillan, 2000; 2008); the constitutional provisions on seat allocation (Jayal & Mehta, 2010; Rao and Singh, 2007); and the electoral impact of boundary changes on party competition and voter behaviour (Iyer and Reddy, 2013; Chhibber and Nooruddin, 2004) have all been studied. The delimitation exercise of 2008 has been given special focus for managing intra-state redistricting without changing the inter-state seat formula (Election Commission of India, 2008). But comparatively little has been given to the impact of the inter-state seat freeze (as opposed to intra-state delimitation) on the balance of federal power and resource distribution.

The impact of electoral boundary design on multi-level governance is under-researched at the comparative federalism level. The literature on fiscal federalism has built up a strong framework for analysing intergovernmental transfers (Oates, 1972; Shah, 2006; Watts, 1999), and the politics of distributive allocation has been extensively studied in the context of legislative organisation (Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen, 1981; Persson and Tabellini, 2003; Rodden, 2006). The study of malapportionment in comparative perspective has also expanded, as have studies of the distributive effects of malapportionment in Latin American federations and majoritarian systems (Stepan, 2004; Samuels and Snyder, 2001; Gibson, Calvo and Falleti, 2004). However, the two areas of research – electoral boundary design and fiscal federalism – have not often been discussed together. The question of whether institutional seat-allocation rules create representational asymmetries that influence intergovernmental resource distribution is under-researched. This forms a significant gap: assuming that the process of representation has an effect of being able to form the bargaining power in the federal institutions, then malapportionment can have a systematic impact on



the distribution of resources in the regions, thus strengthening or weakening regional disparities.

The paper fills these gaps by theorizing the concept of delimitation as an institution of federal design, as opposed to a distinctively technical or electoral process. It establishes a framework that makes the connection between representational allocation and federal equity and empirically analyses the Indian case to determine whether malapportionment influences the fiscal and developmental results among the states. Through this, the paper will not only add to interdisciplinary discussions about federalism, democratic representation and political economy, but also provide timely information to the next delimitation exercise in India after 2026.

The division of political power and representation within the units that are territorially defined is a fundamental issue about federal systems. One of the main principles in democratic federalism is that national legislative representation must be based on population distribution, in order to achieve political equality among citizens and regions. But this principle is frequently offset in the interests of competing objectives like territorial equity and political stability. According to comparative scholarship, federal systems often allow deviations to strict proportionality, resulting in different extents of malapportionment (Lijphart, 1999; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989).

Malapportionment has received a lot of research on its effects on democratic representation and the policy of the people. It may manipulate the legislative result, and affect distributive politics by placing undue weight on some areas (Peltzman, 1976; Persson and Tabellini, 2003). These distortions also influence the intergovernmental bargaining in federal contexts, but the relationship between representation and federal equity is not well-examined.

The literature available on delimitation in India has mostly concentrated on legal provisions and administration of elections (Election Commission of India, several reports; McMillan, 2008). There is, however, sparse scholarship relating delimitation to the wider issues of federal balance, fiscal redistribution and inter-state inequality. Likewise, the theoretical understanding of fiscal federalism is well-theorized (Oates, 1972), but the political processes concerning the political linkage between the representation and the allocation of resources are under-researched.



The current paper attempts to fill these gaps by conceptualizing delimitation as a key institution of federal design. It examines the influence of representational distortions on federal equity and whether they lead to disparities in access to public resources among states.

2. Background: Delimitation in India

Delimitation is the redrawing of the borders of parliamentary and state legislative constituencies to determine changes in population. The constitutional provisions for delimitation are provided in Article 81, 82, 170 and 330 of the Indian Constitution. The first Delimitation Commission was set up under the Delimitation Commission Act, 1952, and later commissions under the Delimitation Commission Acts, 1962 and 1972. Three delimitation exercises were conducted in 1952, 1963 and 1973, each of which reallocated seats among states based on the latest census data and redrew constituency boundaries within states (McMillan, 2008; Election Commission of India, 2008).

The Constitution (Forty-Second Amendment) Act, 1976, changed this process by fixing the number of seats in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies at the numbers determined by the 1971 Census. The justification, as explained in parliamentary discussion and later in academic literature, was to avoid the possibility of penalizing states that have been able to lower fertility rates by reducing their representation compared to states with higher fertility rates (McMillan, 2008; Rao and Singh, 2007). The Constitution (Eighty-Fourth Amendment) Act, 2001, extended the freeze to 2026. In 2002-2008, another delimitation exercise was carried out under the Delimitation Act, 2002, which allowed the Delimitation Commission to redraw the boundaries of the constituencies within a state but made it clear that the boundaries of the states themselves would not be changed (Election Commission of India, 2008).

The practice of using delimitation as a tool of federal accommodation is not exclusive to India. The Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act, 1964 was passed in Canada to remove the politics from boundary drawing by creating independent redistributive commissions. The Boundary Commissions in the United Kingdom are also statutory bodies that are reviewed periodically (Grofman and Lijphart, 1986). India's system is unique, because it has a "seat freeze" between states, so that the population changes are compounded into increasing



representational imbalances between states, which are not corrected on a regular basis. This institutional design has had a reinforcement of the disengagement of population shares and legislative representation. The states in southern and western India that experienced less growth in population have continued to have relatively better representation per capita whereas those in the north have become underrepresented. This has brought about a kind of malapportionment which is structural and not partisan as is the case with classic gerrymandering witnessed in other countries such as the United States.

Notably, in India, delimitation is done at two levels, (1) distribution of seats among states (inter-state representation) and (2) delimitation of constituency boundaries among states (intra-state representation). The latter has been periodically revised, but the former is frozen, so the key matter to be examined at the federal level is inter-state malapportionment. This difference is fundamental, because it changes the emphasis of political competition within states to the allocation of political authority within the federation.

Although it is important, the federal implications of delimitation are under-scholarly. The majority of these analyses consider the freeze a demographic or developmental policy, not as a process that remakes political bargaining power. With India set to undergo the scheduled delimitation exercise after 2026, it is often more important to understand these institutional dynamics, especially given the issue of regional inequality and political representation.

3. Theory: Federal Representation and Equity

In this paper, the conceptualization of delimitation as a fundamental institution of political economy within federal systems is developed, establishing a theoretical framework of legislative representation as the source of federal equity. The three interconnected concepts which are at the core are federal equity, malapportionment and political bargaining power. Federal equity is a normative concept that the constituent units of a federation should have a justifiable and significant say in the national decision making processes. Although federations usually leave the strict population-based representation in order to consider the territorial factors, the deviation is usually well-grounded within well-conceived institutional boundaries (Oates, 1972; Lijphart, 1999). But once these deviations are sharp or chronic, they can produce systematic differences in political power.



Malapportionment is a way of capturing these kinds of deviations by determining how much the portion of the legislative seats in a region deviates compared to the portion of the population it represents (Samuels and Snyder, 2001). Federal systems typically feature two parallel representational logics. The upper chambers, like the United States Senate, the German Bundesrat, or the Rajya Sabha in India, are usually structured to represent territorial units, rather than populations, and thus are intended to be equally represented, irrespective of their population size (Lijphart, 1999; Tsebelis and Money, 1997). Such deviation from population proportionality is not malapportionment in the normative sense, but rather a product of the federal bargain at constitutional design. The democratic concern is specifically in the lower house of the legislature, where the principle is that each citizen's vote carries equal weight (Dahl, 1971; Stepan, 2004), such as the Lok Sabha. It is in this context that the freezing of inter-state seat allocation results in true malapportionment, that is, the proportion of seats a state receives is systematically different from the proportion of its population. Here, malapportionment is not just a matter of institutional compromise, but can actively redefine the nature of political outcomes by creating a redistribution of relative power of various regions.

The process by which malapportionment influences federal equity can be achieved through political bargaining. Representation in the legislature is a vital asset to federal systems because it determines the ability of subnational groups to affect decisions made by the national policy, to be involved in formulating coalitions, as well as bargaining to distribute the available public resources (Riker, 1964; Tsebelis, 2002; Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, 2011). Institutional structures of representation as stressed in the political economy literature can be distributive with profound implications on the direction and size of public expenditure (Persson and Tabellini, 2003). The logic follows from the foundational insight of Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen (1981) that legislative organisation shapes the geographic and sectoral distribution of public goods: legislators with larger seat shares relative to population can extract more resources for their constituencies than the social optimum would warrant, a phenomenon documented across diverse federal settings including the United States (Knight, 2008), Argentina (Gibson, Calvo, and Falleti, 2004), and Brazil (Rodden, 2006). Representation is therefore not merely an issue of formal inclusion but a determinant of the substantive outcomes of policy.



Elaborating on this observation, the main thesis of this paper is that delimitation is a redistributive institution in federal systems. It indirectly influences the distribution of economic resources and development opportunities by defining the distribution of political voice between regions. Overrepresented states in proportion to their population might have disproportionate power in legislative discussions and budgetary procedures, and thus, have a greater chance of getting preferential fiscal transfers and policy compromises. This is consistent with the results of comparative studies of the distributive effects of legislative malapportionment. Samuels and Snyder (2001) find that overrepresented districts systematically get more public resources than their population share would suggest, and they explain this as being due to the increased per-vote bargaining power that overrepresentation provides. Rao and Singh (2007) also report similar patterns of central resource allocation in the Indian context, but without making an explicit link between representational structure and central resource allocation. On the other hand, states that are underrepresented might be structurally disadvantaged in acquiring central resources, despite objective indicators of need indicating otherwise.

Against this background, the paper contends that endemic malapportionment in a population based legislative chamber can systematically affect intergovernmental bargaining and, consequently, allocation of fiscal and developmental resource. Although the delimitation freeze in India was normatively right in its aim of providing incentives to curb population, it might have caused unintended effects on federal equity by favoring certain areas over others in the political process. This gives rise to the belief that such representational asymmetries are not just symbolic but have concrete consequences to distributive results among states.

Based on the theoretical framework, the empirical analysis tests the association between representational asymmetries and fiscal outcomes in a federal system. Considering the institutional background of fixed seat allocation and changing demographic trends, the analysis supports the following hypotheses. First, malapportionment is likely to be correlated with increased per capita fiscal transfers. States which are overrepresented in the national legislature are likely to have a greater bargaining power in intergovernmental negotiations, and hence they are likely to have a disproportionate share of central resources.

Second, the impact of representation on fiscal transfers is likely to be conditional on political affiliation with the central government. It is hypothesised that overrepresented states



that are controlled by parties aligned with the Union government are more effective in translating representational benefits into material benefits, which is the interaction between institutional structure and partisan politics. Although representational asymmetry is an outcome to be explained, in this paper, representational asymmetry is treated as an institutional feature and not as an outcome. In the same way, even though representational benefits might have implications on the overall developmental outcomes, the empirical analysis is specifically on fiscal transfers as the main channel through which the representational benefits may be realised.

4. Data and Methodology

Data sources

The research uses a state-level panel dataset of India in the years 2014-2024. The state-year is the unit of analysis, which enables the analysis of cross-sectional and temporal change in representation and fiscal outcomes. The chosen time period indicates the presence of stable post-reform fiscal data and reflects recent trends in the system of fiscal federalism in India.

The main dependent variable is per capita central transfers, which is the sum of the share of the state in central taxes (tax devolution) and grants-in-aid received by the state government divided by the state population. The information on central transfers is based on the audit reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on the state finances. These reports are a good source of measuring intergovernmental transfers because they provide audited and consistent state-level fiscal data. Population and economic data are obtained from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Population data is calculated based on official estimates based on the 2011 Census and subsequent projections, whereas state income is calculated using Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) at current prices. These variables are employed to both construct per capita measures and to control the differences in economic capacity and demographic scale across states.

The Election Commission of India provides data on the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha. Since the delimitation freeze has kept the allocation of seats across states constant over the period of the study, variation in representation is due to the difference in population



growth rather than the change in the boundaries of the constituencies. In order to capture the political factors, the analysis incorporates a variable of political alignment (affiliation). This is defined as a binary indicator that is equal to 1 when the ruling party (or coalition) in a state is politically aligned with the party (or coalition) that forms the Union government in a given year, and 0 otherwise. The alignment is made depending on the party control of the state executive in comparison to the composition of the central government.

Measurement

The concept of malapportionment is operationalised as the ratio of the share of a state in legislative seats to the share of the state in population:

$$Malapportionment_{it} = \frac{SeatShare_i}{PopulationShare_{it}}$$

where $SeatShare_i = \frac{Seats_i}{TotalSeats}$ and $PopulationShare_{it} = \frac{Population_{it}}{TotalPopulation_t}$.

In the empirical analysis, the natural logarithm of malapportionment is used to enhance interpretability and minimize skewness.

The dependent variable is defined as:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \frac{CentralTransfers_{it}}{Population_{it}}$$

where central transfers include both tax devolution and grants-in-aid. This expression is in line with the conventional measures applied in the fiscal federalism literature (Oates, 1972).

Empirical Strategy

The empirical analysis is conducted in three steps, starting with a baseline specification and adding controls and fixed effects. The baseline model approximates the association between malapportionment and per capita transfers by ordinary least squares:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \alpha + \beta \ln Malapportionment_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

This specification captures the unconditional association between representational asymmetry and fiscal outcomes.

The second model is further extended to control variables to take into consideration economic and demographic factors:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \alpha + \beta \ln Malapportionment_{it} + \gamma_1 NSDP_{it} + \gamma_2 Population_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$



The addition of NSDP enables the analysis to capture redistributive mechanisms that allocate more resources to poorer states, and population controls scale effects.

In order to include political dynamics, a variable that measures alignment with the central government is included:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \alpha + \beta \ln Malapportionment_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \delta Alignment_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

This specification tests whether political proximity influences the allocation of transfers, consistent with theories of distributive politics (Persson and Tabellini, 2003).

To address unobserved heterogeneity, the analysis employs a two-way fixed effects model:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \alpha + \beta \ln Malapportionment_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

where μ_i captures time-invariant state-specific factors (e.g., institutional capacity, geography), and λ_t captures common shocks across years (e.g., macroeconomic conditions, policy changes). This specification offers a more stringent test by taking advantage of within-state change over time.

Lastly, to test the hypothesis of whether the effects of malapportionment are mediated by political alignment, an interaction term is added:

$$Transfers_{it}^{pc} = \alpha + \beta_1 \ln Malapportionment_{it} + \beta_2 Alignment_{it} + \beta_3 (\ln Malapportionment_{it} \times Alignment_{it}) + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

The coefficient on the interaction term (β_3) captures whether representational advantages translate into higher transfers conditional on political alignment.

Limitations & Methodological Contribution

The identification strategy is based on the institutional aspect of the delimitation freeze in India, which determines the distribution of seats among the states. This means that the change in malapportionment is not caused by current policy decisions but is mainly caused by demographic changes, which alleviates the issue of reverse causality. Nevertheless, the analysis does not assert strict causal identification, but it presents evidence of systematic associations in line with the theoretical framework. This paper combines the lessons of electoral systems and fiscal federalism by integrating measures of representation with fiscal outcomes in a panel framework. Although previous studies have explored redistribution using formula-based mechanisms (Oates, 1972) and institutional impacts on policy outcomes



(Persson and Tabellini, 2003), this study focuses on the role of representation as a mediating variable in federal distributive politics.

Results

Table 1. Malapportionment and Per Capita Transfers

Variables	(1) Baseline	(2) + Controls	(3) + Political	(4) FE Model	(5) FE + Interaction
ln(Malapportionment)	40273.4*** (-2111.5)	42927.0*** (-2805.1)	43404.5*** (-2812)	9268.2 (-41570.8)	-13910.4 (-33523.8)
NSDP	-	-0.0421*** (0.0104)	-0.0438*** (0.0104)	0.0368* (0.0163)	0.0444*** (0.0132)
Population	-	-0.0417* (0.0202)	-0.0412* (0.0101)		
Political Alignment	-	-	2791.3 (1688.3)	4038.8*** (1106.3)	919.1 (927.4)
ln(Malap × Alignment)	-	-	-	-	30203.2*** (2500.4)
Constant	11045.5*** (968.6)	18855.7*** (1986)	17812.1*** (2078.5)	-	-
State FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	308	308	308	308	308
R ²	0.543	0.573	0.577	0.923	0.951

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1



Table 1 shows the results of the five regression models. The baseline estimates show that there is a strong, statistically significant, positive relationship between malapportionment and per capita central transfers. The coefficient on the log of malapportionment is large and highly significant ($p < 0.01$) in the first 3 specifications. This result is stronger with the addition of economic and demographic controls, such as state income (NSDP) and population. The control variables provide further information. In Models (2) and (3), the coefficient of NSDP is negative and statistically significant, which means that the poorer the state, the higher the transfers are. The effect of population is also negative, though weakly significant, which means that more populous states receive lower per capita transfers, which is consistent with the hypothesis that representational imbalance disadvantages high-population states.

Including the political alignment variable in Model (3), the coefficient is positive but not always robust across specifications. When state and year fixed effects are added (Model 4), the direct effect of malapportionment becomes statistically insignificant. This implies that a large portion of the cross-sectional variation in transfers is captured by time-invariant state characteristics and common temporal shocks. This, however, does not nullify the role of representation, but instead, it implies that its effects might be mediated by more conditional or interaction-based processes.

In Model (5) where the interplay between malapportionment and political alignment is brought in, the interaction term is positive and highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), and the main effect of malapportionment becomes negative and insignificant. This means that representational advantage is not enough to achieve higher transfers, but rather its impacts are conditional on political alignment with the central government. That is, overrepresentation is converted into material benefits mainly when it is combined with political closeness to the centre. The fact that the explanatory power (Within R^2) has increased significantly (The Within R^2 increasing by 0.06 to 0.39) further supports the fact that the political channel is central to the understanding of how institutional representation translates into distributive outcomes.



5. Discussion

The results support the argument that malapportionment is a politically mediated process that influences distributive outcomes in federal systems. In line with the theoretical framework, representation is not just symbolic but functions as a kind of political capital that can be used in intergovernmental bargaining. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that this effect is conditional rather than automatic. The strong, positive relationship between malapportionment and transfers in the baseline models is consistent with broader political economy theories that focus on the distributive implications of institutional design (Persson and Tabellini, 2003). The overrepresented states seem to have structural advantages in accessing central resources, lending support to the hypothesis that deviations of population-based representation can create systematic inequalities in federal systems.

Meanwhile, the fixed-effects findings make a strictly structural interpretation difficult. The fact that the main effect of malapportionment disappears when the heterogeneity of states and years is controlled, indicates that the representational benefits are entrenched in the larger institutional and political frameworks. This is in line with comparative evidence that the impacts of malapportionment tend to be dependent on party systems, coalition politics, and executive-legislative relationships (Samuels and Snyder, 2001). Of special interest in this respect are the results of the interaction. The close and positive relationship between malapportionment and political alignment suggests that the institutional benefits are mobilized via political means. The overrepresented states do not necessarily receive higher transfers, but are better placed to translate their representational advantage into material gains when they are politically aligned with the central government. This finding highlights the importance of political alignment as a mediating mechanism that bridges institutional structure and fiscal outcomes. This has significant consequences to the interpretation of federal equity in India. While the delimitation freeze was normatively justified as a means of incentivising population control, the results suggest that it may have unintentionally created a system in which representational inequalities interact with partisan dynamics to shape resource distribution. This brings up the issue of whether fiscal transfers are neutral or not and to what degree they are based on objective criteria or political considerations.



6. Conclusion

In a broader sense, the results contribute to the literature on fiscal federalism by showing that distributive outcomes cannot be fully explained without considering political representation. Although traditional models focus on formula-based transfers and need-based allocation (Oates, 1972), this paper demonstrates that representation and political alignment jointly affect allocation patterns, adding a layer of political contingency to ostensibly technocratic processes. Lastly, the findings are directly applicable to the next delimitation exercise in India. Any reform of constituency allocation should not only take into account the demographic fairness, but also its downstream consequences on intergovernmental bargaining and fiscal distribution. In the absence of such consideration, institutional reforms can inadvertently contribute to the existing regional inequalities.

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