



Spiritual Ascendancy through Mystical Music: Rumi in Indian Cinema

Md Samaun SK ^{1*}

¹ Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi is a notable figure in poetry, Islamic theology, religious philosophy, Sufi mysticism, and spiritualism. He lived in the 13th century. Through various media, including literature (particularly poetry), mystic paths, and spiritual traditions, his extensive understanding of mysticism and spiritualism has an impact on generations to come. His deep influence may be seen in present popular culture creations including music, movies, and poetry. His teachings resonate with the wide-ranging global audiences of the 21st century. Rumi's teachings about the transformational power of love and compassion, the path of self-discovery and spiritual progress, and the unity and oneness of the Supreme Being offered comfort to today's mentally broken, divested, and diluted population. The Supreme Being provides some comfort to today's mentally broken, divested, and diluted population. Because of his profound teachings, Rumi became one of the most adored and renowned people across the world. This noble teaching of Rumi made him one of the most beloved and celebrated personages in human history.

Therefore, this study traces the impact and influences of Rumi's mystic teaching regarding love, compassion, self-discovery, and transcendental self, specifically in Indian music and cinema. The study also strives to analyze why the mystic teaching of Rumi is crucial today and how it may help to develop a better human civilization. The study also focuses on what could be the future mode/medium through which Rumi's noble teachings can be spread more to reach a wide range of audiences all over the world.



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1. Introduction

Mysticism, as both a philosophical orientation and an experiential mode of knowledge, has occupied a central position in spiritual, literary, and aesthetic traditions across cultures. In Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, one of the deepest expressions of this idea is found in the works of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), whose poetry and insights explore a vision of reality based on divine love (ishq), selflessness (fana), spiritual existence (baqa), and the oneness of existence (wahdat al-wujud). In the context of modernity and late capitalism, characterized by alienation, material excess, and the fragmentation of the self, Rumi's mysticism has re-emerged as a counter-discursive spiritual paradigm. His philosophy offers an alternative mode of subjectivity that challenges Cartesian dualism and instrumental rationality by

*Corresponding author, ✉ samaunskmanuu@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8531-1784>

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proposing love as both ontology and epistemology. This renewed relevance has facilitated the migration of Rumi's mystical ideas into contemporary cultural forms, particularly cinema and music, which function as dominant ideological and affective apparatuses in the modern world. As visual and auditory media, films and music possess a unique capacity to externalize interior states, making them especially suited to the representation of mystical longing, spiritual crisis, and transcendence. From a film-theoretical perspective, cinema operates not merely as a narrative medium but as a phenomenological and symbolic space where desire, subjectivity, and meaning are negotiated. Drawing upon theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Laura Mulvey, and André Bazin, cinema may be understood as a site where time, memory, affect, and becoming are rendered visible. When combined with mystical philosophy, film stories often move away from straightforward realism to explore themes like transition, abundance, repetition, and strong emotions, which relate closely to the Sufi path of the seeker (*salik*). In this sense, mystical cinema can be read as a visual analogue of Sufi epistemology, privileging experience over explanation and transformation over resolution.

Indian cinema, with its long-standing engagement with music, poetry, and metaphysical inquiry, provides a particularly fertile terrain for the cinematic reconfiguration of Sufi mysticism. Historically shaped by Bhakti and Sufi traditions, Indian cultural consciousness has been receptive to non-dualistic philosophies and spirituality. Contemporary Indian films increasingly draw, explicitly or implicitly, upon Rumi's mystical lexicon to articulate narratives of love, suffering, madness, and self-realization. These films often dramatize the dissolution of ego, the redemptive function of pain, and the paradoxical union of loss and fulfillment, which are the central tenets of Rumi's thought.

This study examines how the mystical philosophy of Jalaluddin Rumi, particularly his ideas of divine love, self-annihilation, and spiritual transcendence, finds expression in Indian cinema and music. By analyzing selected films and music, the study demonstrates how Rumi's Sufi metaphysics is reinterpreted through modern narrative forms to articulate spiritual longing, emotional transformation, and the search for meaning in contemporary life. It argues that Indian cinema functions as a modern spiritual medium that reimagines Rumi's mysticism, enabling his timeless vision of love and self-realization to resonate within present-day cultural and artistic contexts.

This study undertakes a critical and interdisciplinary examination of the spiritual ascendancy of Rumi in Indian cinema and music, situating cinematic texts within the theoretical frameworks of Sufi mysticism and spiritual phenomenology. By closely analyzing selected films like *Rockstar* (2011), *Jab Harry Met Sejal* (2017), and *Fitoor* (2016), the essay looks at how Rumi's ideas about divine love, losing oneself, and rising above are expressed in movies through character development, storylines, music, and visual symbols. The study further extends its scope to global musical cultures, examining how Rumi's poetry informs contemporary transnational artistic practices, thereby underscoring the fluid movement of mystical ideas across cultural and geographical boundaries.

By foregrounding Rumi's mysticism as a theoretical lens rather than a mere literary influence, this essay argues that Indian cinema does not simply appropriate Sufi symbolism but actively participates in a mystical discourse that reconfigures modern subjectivity. In doing so, the study positions cinema and music as modern spiritual texts in which mystical and spiritual philosophies are re-enacted, reinterpreted, and re-mediated for contemporary audiences. Ultimately, the study contends that Rumi's enduring presence in cinema and music reflects a deeper cultural yearning for wholeness, compassion, and transcendence in an increasingly disenchanted.

2. Rumi as a Spiritual Master

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi is one of the notable figures in poetry, Islamic theology, religious philosophy, Sufi mysticism, and spiritualism. His profound knowledge of mysticism and spiritualism influences generation after generation through a variety of media, including literature, spiritual traditions, and mystic paths. Contemporary popular cultural productions, including modern poetry, music, and film, bear witness to his great influence, which has reached a global audience in the twenty-first century. A generation that has been psychologically damaged and materialistically distracted finds comfort in Rumi's teachings on the transformational power of love and compassion. His teaching of spiritual progress leads to self-discovery and unity with the oneness of the Supreme Being. Because of his admirable teachings, Rumi became one of the most beloved and celebrated figures in the world.

Spiritualism and mysticism are quite associated and intertwined ideas, which have been treated as a dominant mode to shed light upon the theme of love, compassion, and oneness of being. Rumi skillfully applied this mode in his works to develop mystical ideals and spiritualism. The Oxford English Dictionary defined mysticism as "a belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect."

The 'Self' and 'Oneness of Being' have been subjects of investigation in the mystic tradition of spiritualism. Rumi, being a master of it, has been shedding light on the mystic nature of the Self and its transcendental phases to acquire the highest level of esoteric knowledge about the Self. Thus, 'Divine love, Self, and Oneness of Being' have been the prime subjects of investigation in the field of spiritualism in his *Masnavi*, *Divan-e Shams*, and *Fihi ma Fihi*. The spiritual poetry of Rumi has inspired countless other poets, musicians, novelists, and filmmakers all over the world. This study primarily focuses on how Indian film and music get inspiration from and reflect the spiritual ascendancy of Rumi. There are several films and music inspired by Rumi's poetry and his teaching of love, compassion, and spirituality. Some of them are evaluated and interpreted below:

2.1 Rockstar (2011)

A veteran scriptwriter and film director, Imtiaz Ali, made 'Rockstar' in 2011. The main character, Jordan, played by Ranveer Kapoor, embarks upon the journey to find out his self or true being. This adventure is the journey of self-realization, and ultimately it reaches its destination, which is not smooth at all. Jordan undergoes a prolonged period of suffering, similar to a seeker or a Sufi priest who endures a painful process of self-annihilation. In Sufi tradition, Rumi explains it as '*Fana*' (Annihilation) and '*Baqa*' (Subsistence), which describes the journey of a seeker. This path of self-annihilation is the most challenging step, full of trouble, pain, and suffering. A seeker is advised to encounter their pains and sufferings until they destroy their ego. Rumi says,

"Die before you die so that you will not die." (Rumi, 1925, p. 65)

Khatana, the canteen owner in the film *Rockstar*, tells Jordan quite the same thing. He explains that "one thing common among all artists is a life-altering heartbreak." Jordan wants to become a world-famous rock star. He wants to express the inner truth to the world. In the first half of the film, Jordan cannot find the sparkle that can help him manifest his inner spirit and illuminate his personality. He falls in love with Heer. Gradually, he gets intimate with her, and finally, she dies of amnesia, leaving Jordan in a permanent state of grief. In Rumi's words,

"The wound is the place where the light enters you." (Rumi, 1925, p. 65)

Jordan finds a way of self-illuminating through this wound caused by the unbearable grief, and gradually he finds out how his inner spirit expresses his pain and true being. He sings 'Nadaan Parindey' with his full passion, energy, and compassion, urging his transcendental self, or his beloved who left this world, or the One Supreme Being. This lyric draws its introductory part, theme, and key line directly from Rumi's other famous verse:

"The hunting falcon hears the sound of the drums.

Come home, come home."

(Rockstar, 2011)

In an interview with the Times of India, recalling the background of this song, director Imtiaz Ali expresses that some of his friends from Canada sent him a poem by Rumi, and it became the central refrain of the song. 'Rockstar' is such a diverse film that reflects Rumi's teaching of love, compassion, and inner self in various ways. Director Imtiaz Ali touches upon Rumi's poetry in the monologue of the film as well. Dialogue says:

"Yahaan se bahut door, ghalat aur sahi ke paar, ek maidan hai. Main wahaan milunga tujhe."

(Rumi, 2015)

This line vehemently echoes Rumi's words...

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there!"

2.2 Jab Harry Met Sejal

Director Imtiaz Ali's other latest film, namely *Jab Harry Met Sejal* (2017), has a tagline, "What you seek is seeking you," which is directly taken from Rumi's verse. Although Ali, in an interview with the Times of India, mentioned that this affinity is "coincidental, particularly about Maulana Rumi, because a lot of things that he has written, they have found relevance to what I was doing at various stages of my life," the theme of the film revolves around Rumi's philosophy of "What you seek is seeking you". Ali also revealed that I am given more credit for understanding it than I have.

Harry, or Harindar, is professionally a tour guide in Europe who belongs to Punjab, India. At an early age, Harry flees to Canada with a dream to become a singer but fails to achieve it. Life has its plan. Eventually, Harry moves to Europe and becomes a tour guide. The lead role of Harry or Harindar is played by Shahrukh Khan. On the other hand, the heroine Sejal Zaveri (Anushka Sharma) is a Gujarati lawyer who loses her engagement ring on a trip to Europe. She seeks Harry's help in tracing her lost ring. Despite their contrasting personalities, Sejal and Harry grow closer and share deep, perplexing, and esoteric emotions.

Sejal begins to see Harry's heartache, which causes a deep wound inside, and he learns that there are weaknesses behind his confident exterior. Eventually, they develop feelings for each other. Throughout their journey, they are searching for the lost engagement ring. Once, at night, a mob attack Harry, and Sejal is searching for some first aid in her handbag for Harry. Suddenly, she discovers her ring inside the bag, which has been there all around her journey since the beginning. It was never lost at all. At this very moment, she realizes that what she has been searching for has always been with her, and it is also seeking her in return.

Thus, Rumi's concept of "what you seek is seeking you" comes true and is perfectly illustrated in the film. Harry and Sejal accept each other, and the journey on which they embark comes to a joyful end.

2.3 Fitoor (2016)

Based on Charles Dickens' 1861 novel *Great Expectations*, director Abhishek Kapoor made a film, namely *Fitoor* (*Madness, Obsession, Passion*), in 2016. Aditya Roy Kapur, Katrina Kaif, and Tabu play the main characters in the movie. This film is categorized as a musical love drama, written by Abhishek Kapoor and Supratik Sen, loosely based on Dickens's novel, yet it reflects the impression of Rumi while screening the madness, obsession, and passion in love. These affinities with Rumi's concept of love might be coincidental; the originality of the ideas goes to Rumi.

One of Rumi's poems, *Fitoor-e-Ishq* (The Madness of Love), served as the inspiration for the movie's title. Rumi demonstrates his love in humility and tenderness. The way of the lover is the complete fulfillment of all human possibilities. Rumi says, "Only love can explain itself." Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries, drawing lovers to various love forms and ultimately to the Sovereign of Love.

When the pen came to the subject of love, it broke.
When the discourse reached the topic of love,
The pen split, and the paper tore.
If intellect tries to explain it,
It falls helpless as a donkey on a muddy trail;
Only love itself can explain love and lovers!
The proof of the sun is the sun itself.
If you wish to see it, don't turn away from it.

(Rumi, 1925, pp. 110–116)

In the film, a 13-year-old Kashmiri student from a lower-middle-class household, Noor Nizami, works part-time to supplement his income. Begum Hazrat Jahaan, a wealthy widow who never leaves her expansive but dilapidated estate, is his employer. She lives in constant sadness. Therefore, she hires Noor, the son of a respected but impoverished family, as an errand boy to drive her to the bank, post office, and shopping, among other places. Firdaus is the only daughter of Begum Hazrat Jahan, who is of the same age as Noor. At their first meeting, Noor falls deeply in love with Firdaus. Hazrat understands the situation and expresses her disapproval of her daughter's friendship with an errand guy. Hazrat insults and taunts

Noor while conveying the news that she is sending Firdaus to a fancy boarding school abroad. She mocks Noor:

"Pyar bhi ajeeb janwar hai, chabuk taan do, bhookha maar do,
Zinda gaad do, par kambakht baaz nahi aata." (Fittoor, 2016)
Love is a strange kind of animal. Even if you hit it with a whip,
Keep it hungry, and bury it alive, it still doesn't give up. (Self-translation)

Meanwhile, it comes to light that Hazrat's lover, probably Firdaus's father, had devastated her when she was young. He abandoned her while pregnant and cheated on her. He ran away, stealing her jewelry. The wound has become a grave in the heart of Hazrat, yet she cannot overcome this grief; rather, she gradually drowns more and more in obsessive love, which drags her to madness.

In another scene, she addresses Noor:

"Khuda ki barkat hai mohabbat. Mohabbat karo to toot ke, bina khauf ke, bina sharm ke, bina soch ke.
Agar jeet gaye to kya kehna. Hare bhi toh baazi maat nahi." (Fittoor, 2016)

Love is God's blessing. If you love, then do it to the fullest, without fear, without feeling shy, and without thinking. It is wonderful if you win. Even if you lose, the battle is still not over. (Self-translation)

The essence of this emotion is very much present throughout Rumi's poetry, often encouraging a complete and unreserved approach to love. Rumi essentially conveys that if you choose to love, you should do so completely and fully, with your entire being, not just a part of your heart; rather, "love with your whole heart." He says,

"A thousand half-loves must be forsaken to take one whole heart home." (Fittoor, 2016)

Though Hazrat gradually starts to understand her error that she unjustly humiliated Noor, she remains insistent that Firdaus should wed Bilal after noticing that Noor is now a prosperous artist who associates with exclusive circles. A flashback reveals why Hazrat is so insistent that her daughter treat Noor with extreme caution and marry Bilal, the safe and traditional option, as it recounts her lover Mufti leaving her pregnant and fleeing with all her jewels.

Noor understands that she has been seeking atonement by applying her desire for revenge on Mufti to him by torturing him and planning his destruction. She cannot stand to see other young people, including her daughter, beaming. She expresses her state of complete madness in obsessive love.

"Khud se azaadi toh sirf maut hi de sakti hai, ya phir ishq." (Fittoor, 2016)
Only death can free you from yourself, or else love. (Self-translation)

Noor returns to the exhibition and sets fire to his artwork, which was associated with Firdaus's memory. Another flashback reveals that Firdaus is Hazrat's adopted daughter, and she lost her baby. She kills herself after waking up from that half-dream, inconsolable at Noor's remarks about her resentful and ill inner self.

At her funeral, a distraught Firdaus, who is still betrothed to Bilal and plans to wed him, as Hazrat had always fervently desired, opens the pendant that she has worn around her neck. To her surprise, she discovers inside it a picture of a contented young couple. They are Mufti and Hazrat. Firdaus realizes that her mother, Hazrat, has never been able to move on from her love for Mufti, even though he was a dishonest man. Immediately after seeing it, Firdaus understands that she too will never be able to move on from her love for Noor, who is a wonderful and honest man who truly loves her. Upon realizing this, Firdaus decides to dissolve her engagement with Bilal and live her entire life with Noor. Rumi says:

Love is reckless, not reason.
Reason seeks a profit.
Love comes on strong.
Consuming herself, unabashed.
She risks everything and asks for nothing.
Love gambles away every gift God bestows.
Without cause, God gave us being;
Without cause, give it back again.

(Rumi, 1925, pp. 110–116)

Another point needs to be mentioned here: whenever Rumi talks about love that refers to divine love. His practical knowledge of love can guide everyone, whether the person is a seeker of divine love or a lover of another human being.

In one way or another, love changes the lovers and turns them into a gift to creation. The simplest definition of love is desire or love for the loveable. We aspire to own the things we cherish. Violence, jealousy, and possessiveness may result from this. On a different level, love is the desire to share a mutually satisfying joy with others. However, Rumi stated that there is no greater love than love with no object, describing the pinnacle of love (Rumi, 1925). When a person reaches this stage of development or maturation, they exude love effortlessly because they embody love itself. Rumi's association with Shams of Tabriz, a mysterious, nomadic stranger who entered Rumi's life with the force of a divine epiphany, allowed him to find this esoteric form of love.

The nature or style of our love for the divine drastically changes as we realize that everything is infused with it. Our love evolves from a human form to a divine form as we come to see the object of our love as encompassing everything. Divine love may start with our love for one another, but it progressively expands to include everything. As our love evolves, we transcend the conventions of human love, and our approach to loving can become the most positive way to cope with the pervasive hatred in today's society. The film *Fitoor* explores the idea of madness and obsessive love. It also shows that true love can help people find their identities or inner selves. The film also explores themes of self-destruction, impulsive actions, and the question of whether love is possible without self-knowledge. And all of these ideas are expressly presenting the affinities and influences of Rumi on the subject of love.

3. Coldplay in India: How Their Music Was Influenced by Rumi's Poetry:

Perhaps, a few people could have predicted the impact Chris Martin, the singer, pianist, and co-founder of Coldplay, would have on the band's trajectory when he performed in Mumbai in 2016. In India, the Coldplay concert was more than just a show. It was a major turning point in the band's spiritual development since it combined aspects of modern rock music with ancient Sufi teachings. The story of Coldplay's journey in India began before that historic performance.

Coldplay in India: Before the performance, Chris Martin, the band's main singer, had been searching for meaning and comfort following his well-publicized "conscious uncoupling" from actress Gwyneth Paltrow. Martin's quest led him to the teachings of the 13th-century poet Rumi, whose ageless poetry *The Guest House* struck an unexpected chord with his inner self.

This human being is a guest house.
Every morning, a new guest arrives.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes.
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
Rumi serves as a guide from beyond. (Rumi, 1925)

This poem by Rumi has greatly influenced Martin. As Martin immersed himself in Rumi's poetry, which eventually impacted Coldplay's music, he found solace and inspiration. Through songs that speak to Rumi's teachings on accepting love and the essence of humanity, the band's "Ghost Stories" and "A Head Full of Dreams" albums showcase this enlightenment. The band's growing relationship with their beliefs and customs was demonstrated with the songs "Magic" and "Hymn for the Weekend," the latter of which included Bollywood actress Sonam Kapoor in its music video.

Coldplay's Indian performance solidified this transformation. As the band took the stage in Mumbai, the enthusiasm was palpable. India's vivid essence was brilliantly mirrored by the audience, which was a riot of color and energy. It wasn't just another tour stop for Martin and his team. It was like coming home in a sense, a chance to engage with the journey they had embarked upon.

In front of the audience, Martin stunned them by reciting passages from Rumi's well-known poem "The Guest House," which he feels had a particular influence on him. There was harmony and a sense of

connectedness in the air after the recitation. A focus is on integrating the best aspects of Western civilizations, daily living, spirituality, the past, and the present.

The impact of Coldplay in India extended beyond their live performance; it rekindled their global fan base's interest in Sufi poetry and exposed them to the profound truths of mystical writers like Rumi. Furthermore, the band's music resonated deeply in India, as listeners discovered new and intimate connections with the lyrics within the context of their religious activities and beliefs.

There have been mixed responses to this Coldplay conversation; some have called it cultural appropriation, while others have praised the band for promoting intercultural understanding and respect. As students, Coldplay members have remained humble throughout this voyage of discovery and learning from the spiritual teachings they have discovered in India and its rich philosophical traditions. Their appreciation for the impact India has had on their life and music is something they readily share.

India's and Rumi's influence on Coldplay's music is still expanding today. With their song lyrics delving further into themes like love, unity, and spiritual growth, the band has expanded their sound to incorporate elements of global music. Fans can use Coldplay's musical development as a starting point for spirituality and self-discovery, proving that music can influence cultural change.

Their current world tour reflects the impact of Coldplay's experience in India. Each of their performances becomes an homage to the blending of diversity and demonstrates how music can transcend boundaries and strike a deep chord with listeners. Amid the captivating sights and uplifting melodies, there is a subtle reminder of Rumi's ageless wisdom that penetrates their music—a slight hint at the profound beauty and enigmatic nature that define our human experiences.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the enduring presence and evolving significance of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi's mystical philosophy within Indian cinema and music, arguing that his spiritual vision functions as a powerful theoretical and aesthetic framework rather than a peripheral literary influence. The study has demonstrated how contemporary cinematic and musical narratives reinterpret mystical experience through modern cultural forms. Indian cinema, with its hybrid narrative structures and deep musical integration, emerges as a uniquely effective medium for translating the ineffable dimensions of mysticism into affective, visual, and auditory expressions.

Through close readings of films such as *Rockstar*, *Jab Harry Met Sejal*, and *Fitoor*, the study reveals that Rumi's mystical paradigm is articulated cinematically through narratives of suffering, madness, obsessive love, and self-transcendence. These films foreground the Sufi understanding of pain as a transformative force and love as an ontological principle rather than a mere emotional state. The protagonists' journeys mirror the Sufi path of the seeker, where the dissolution of ego and confrontation with inner wounds become prerequisites for spiritual illumination. In this sense, cinematic suffering is not presented as nihilistic despair but as a necessary passage toward self-realization and expanded consciousness, echoing Rumi's insistence that illumination emerges precisely through rupture and loss.

From a film-theoretical perspective, the study has shown that mystical cinema often destabilizes linear narrative logic and psychological realism, instead privileging affect, repetition, and symbolic excess. Such formal strategies align closely with mystical epistemology, which resists rational explanation in favor of experiential knowledge. Music, in particular, operates as a liminal space within cinema, enabling moments of transcendence where language and narrative yield to rhythm, melody, and emotional intensity. By incorporating Rumi's poetry, directly or thematically, Indian cinema reclaims music as a spiritual medium, restoring its traditional function as a bridge between the material and the metaphysical.

The study further demonstrates that Rumi's influence is not confined to national or religious boundaries but participates in a transnational spiritual discourse, as evidenced by the engagement of global musicians like Coldplay with Sufi poetry and Indian spiritual traditions. This cross-cultural circulation underscores Rumi's universal appeal and highlights how mysticism continues to offer ethical and philosophical alternatives to contemporary crises of meaning, alienation, and cultural fragmentation. Rather than functioning as cultural appropriation alone, such engagements suggest the possibility of intercultural dialogue grounded in shared spiritual concerns.

Ultimately, the study argues that the resurgence of Rumi's mysticism in cinema and music reflects a broader cultural longing for wholeness, compassion, and transcendence in an increasingly disenchanted modern world. By remediating Sufi philosophy through popular culture, Indian cinema and music

transform mystical teachings into accessible yet profound narratives of inner awakening. Rumi's spiritual legacy thus persists not as a static historical inheritance but as a dynamic, living philosophy continually reinterpreted through evolving artistic forms.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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