

Hindi Cinema Made in Northeast India: A Case Study of Three Directors

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream Hindi cinema with pan-Indian presence has been stereotyping its regional identities by presentation of the lifestyle and cultural identities. India's Northeast is also a victim of this ongoing phenomena in the hundred-year-old history of Indian Cinema. No mainstream major Indian filmmaker came forward to make any film on the backdrop of Northeast till recent years, with a remarkable exception like *Mary Kom*, made on the outstanding life of a global boxing icon hailing from this region. Kalpana Lajmi directed films like *Ek Pal* and *Daman* on the backdrop of Assam are in fact productions undertaken at the initiative of co-producer and iconic Assamese legend Dr Bhupen Hazarika. As opposed to this scenario, there had been few initiatives by film directors hailing from Northeast to highlight this region before the Hindi speaking mainstream Indian cinephiles through the production of original Hindi language films on the backdrop of this region. This study explores a selected few Hindi films directed by filmmakers from Northeast India like Dr Bhupen Hazarika, Jahnu Baruah and Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia to examine how this region, its people and culture have been presented and to what extent their films *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*, *Apeksha* and *Kaalsandhya* impacted mainstream Hindi audience in understanding and accepting the unique identity, lifestyle, culture and social norms of this region.

Keywords: Northeast India, Hindi cinema, Regional Identity, Directors from Northeast.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction To Indian Cinema

The vibrancy of Indian cinema is exemplified by the plethora of regional cinemas representing various languages that include Hindi cinema with pan Indian presence. While the Indian regional language cinemas are state or region specific, Hindi cinema claims to have represented the pan-Indian character but largely represents the North Indian Hindi heartland. (Rajadhakshya, 2004) The fallout is the aspirational benchmarks created by Hindi cinegoers from all regional groups about the reflections of their unique lifestyles and cultural characteristics in Hindi cinema. (Baruah, 2009)

In the context of world cinema, India has a significant place, not only from artistic aspects, but also from its commercial success in India-specific cultural genres. Initiatives for making movies by enterprising native Indians in British ruled India had started at the fag end of the nineteenth century, almost immediately after the world witnessed the first few silent movie making successes, through Kinetoscope in the USA and Cinématographe by Lumière Brothers in France. (Rajadhakshya, 2004) It had been a long and exciting cinematic journey stretching over a century now. From 1971 onwards, India has been

world's largest film producer per annum, in many regional languages including Hindi. Apart from India's unofficial film capital Mumbai, popularly described in the media as Bollywood, the country has several important regional film producing centres. (Rajadhyaksha, 1999) (DAVP, 100 Years of Cinema in India, 1995) (Rangoonwalla, 1979) However, while Hindi film industry claims to be representing the entire Indian cultural vibrancy as a total product, India's regional aspirations and cultural ethos have not found adequate space or prominence in the mainstream visuals. This disparity led to the growth of regional language cinema in various regions of India, but they largely remained confined within linguistic boundaries earmarked by language and cultural similarities. As Hindi speaking crowd is the biggest one in India and no other linguistic group could aspire to match the Hindi film loving cinephiles, despite growth of regional cinema in India there always remained aspirations to see region-specific cultures and stories through Hindi language cinema. But, while the thriving South Indian cinema as well as Bengali, Marathi, Gujrati, Punjabi cinema managed to make major inroads into Hindi filmdom with their own Hindi version films locally produced within their region specific film industries, some other regions including Northeast remained outside the periphery of such enterprises despite having their own respective film industries, however small or inconsequential they might be. (Rangoonwalla, 1979)

1.2. Hindi Cinema In India & Connection To The Northeast

India's Hindi film industry based in Bombay or Mumbai is popularly called *Bollywood*. However, Hindi films had been churned out from other regional centres of cinema in India like Calcutta or Kolkata, Madras or Chennai and Hyderabad. (DAVP, 100 Years of Cinema in India, 1995)

The first film director-actor from Assam and Northeast to make an impact in Hindi cinema at pan Indian level was Promothesh Barua. The iconic filmmaker hailing from a royal family in Assam ushered in neo-realism in Indian cinema during his glorious years in Calcutta. Barua opted to make only Bengali and Hindi films, and his iconic film *Devdas* remains a cult classic both in Bengali and Hindi versions. But he did not make any film on the backdrop of Assam or Northeast. (Rangoonwalla, 1979) (Rajadhyaksha, 1999)

Hindi cinema loving public had the first glimpse of a movie depicting a storyline and characters from Northeast in Assamese cultural icon Dr Bhupen Hazarika directed the first authentic Northeast-centric Hindi feature film *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* in the mid 1970s. (Goswami, 2017; Goswami, 2017) From thereon, there had been several more similar ventures depicting life of Northeast cropped up, giving the Hindi moviegoers more choices over the next few decades. But, such successful ventures had been rare and only a handful of directors from Northeast emerged who successfully completed and screened Hindi language films. Under this backdrop, exposure of the region through the medium of cinema at the pan Indian level always remained a challenging task with very limited amount of success.

2. IMPORTANCE OF THE WORK

In spite of cultural bottleneck and regional disparity in the representation of regional diversity of India in the national mainstream visuals, there had been isolated incidents of individual efforts to project Northeast from this region through Hindi films before the pan Indian audience. The pioneer of this entire enterprise was legenday Assamese singer, composer and film director Dr Bhupen Hazarika, who for the first time not only introduced Assamese traditional and modern music to the rest of India through Hindi films, but also conceptualized and directed the first Hindi language film locally produced and shot entirely within Northeast India. (Rangoonwalla, 1979) Several other enterprising film directors from

Northeast followed in the footsteps of Dr Hazarika to make several more Hindi films entirely shot within this region with storylines revolving within incidents and characters from this geographic region. There is a special need to understand their vision and resultant work as well as the impact of their works upon the Hindi cinegoers from outside the region, and this study hopes to shed some lights in that direction to pave the path for more future research and study in this uncharted domain.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of past literature to find any mention about the film directors from the Northeast India making Hindi films on the backdrop of Northeast is a Herculean task and it did not yield deserved result. There is absolutely no mention of any significance in the Indian mainstream media about the first ever full-length feature film in Hindi on the Northeast's backdrop entirely produced and directed by people hailing from the region titled *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*, directed by the Bharat Ratna awardee Dr Bhupen Hazarika and produced by Government of Arunachal Pradesh. (Hazarika, *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*, 1976) There had been fleeting mention about Jahnu Barua's maiden Hindi film *Apeksha* in the media, but that was a casual mention in the context of pan-Indian release of his second Hindi film *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*, which was produced by top Bollywood actor Anupam Kher and starring himself with Urmila Matondkar. (Shedde) Similarly, mainstream media is also totally silent about other filmmakers from Northeast making Hindi films like Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia, who was a multiple national award winning filmmaker since his first Assamese film *Sandhyaraag* in 1977. (Saikia, 1999) The film historians and critics are also silent about these pathbreaking Hindi films depicting Northeast India. But, overall, review of relevant literature provided other information and secondary data which are discussed herein below.

An invaluable addition to the study of Indian cinema is the illustrated coffee table book *Pictorial History of Indian Cinema*. The comprehensive book throws light on important milestones from the days of birth of cinema in India. It not only exhaustively covers the Bombay centric Hindi and Marathi film industry but also tries to record the growth of regional cinema in various pockets around the country. The book presents early history of cinema with considerable details and gives a comprehensive idea about the tumultuous journey of cinema in India. (Rangoonwalla, 1979) Renu Saran's small volume book *History of Indian Cinema* (2012) gives an overview of the birth and overall history of films made in India from the end of nineteenth century. The book uses a lucid and simple language and covers almost all aspects of the subject. (Saran, 2012) *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid* is a comprehensive analytical book with in depth exploration of the entire course of Indian cinema of spanning over almost a century. The book provides a new outlook and thought process of looking at the history of Indian cinema through new light. The interpretations of various phases in the long journey of Indian cinema provides fresh impetus to film scholars and students to go deeper in search of new meaning and dimensions in order to enrich the quest for more meaningful engagement with Indian cinema. (Rajadhakshya, 2004) A Government of India publication, *100 Years of Cinema in India* brought out by DAVP chronicles the entire journey of Indian cinema encompassing a full century from the very beginning. (DAVP, 1995) Jayanta Deka's informative Assamese book *Chalacchitrar Chinta-Charcha* sheds light on many aspects of the medium of cinema. The book looks at both history and aesthetics of cinema and puts special focus on Indian cinema in broader context. (Deka, 1994) Another important Assamese book on cinema *Chalachitra Anwexon* authored by Kanak Ch. Kalita also furthers the exploration of the medium of cinema. Indian

cinema as well as regional cinema of India are adequately focused in this book. (Kalita, 1995) The iconic British Film Institute published the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* which comprehensively follows the films made in India in all languages and adequately focuses on Hindi films as well as other regional language films. (Rajadhyaksha, 1999) After a thorough review of available literature, research gaps have been detected and accordingly objectives, research questions and methodology for this study have been determined.

4. OBJECTIVES

In view of the marginalization of Northeast India in mainstream Hindi cinema, it becomes imperative to make an in-depth study of the limited number of cases of film directors hailing from the region making Hindi movies. The study is to make an impact among the Hindi cinema-going Indian public to understand the significance and overall impact of their miniscule efforts in achieving the goals of better understanding of the region in the rest of India. Thus, the core objectives of the study have been formulated as follows:

1. To study a selected few Hindi feature films on the Northeast's backdrops directed by filmmakers hailing from the Northeast India;
2. To examine how the Northeast India, its people and culture have been presented in the selected few Hindi language feature films made by directors from this region;
3. To explore the impact of such Hindi language feature films on the backdrop of Northeast India directed by native filmmakers from the region on the mainstream Hindi audience.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In conformity with the objectives of this study, the research questions are construed as follows:

- What are the major Hindi feature films on the Northeast's backdrops directed by filmmakers from Northeast India?
- How these films showcased Northeast India, its people and culture?
- What are the impacts of these films upon Hindi film going public in general resulting in better understanding about Northeast India?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will explore Bollywood's relationship with Northeast India by way of film projects based on this region, helmed by directors hailing from this region. In our present research, rather than the artistic or aesthetic treatments of films, we are focusing on the concessions to region specific storylines and issues that India's largest film industry revolving around Hindi language cinema offers in regard to Northeast India. The study highlights and examines the works of three distinguished filmmakers hailing from the Northeast. Their maiden efforts in making Hindi language films depicting storylines, situations and characterizations based completely on this region and its indigenous people have both historic and sociological significance. Since these works were pioneering in nature on various counts and they left behind a rich legacy by foraying into uncharted territory to present the region before the pan-Indian audience for the first time in their purest, raw forms.

In this study, three Hindi films namely *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* directed by Dr Bhupen Hazarika, *Apeksha* directed by Jahnu Barua and *Kaalsandhya* directed by Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia have been

taken up as primary data for content analysis. *Apeksha* and *Kaalsandhya* were viewed in their original film formats in cinema halls during special screenings organized at the initiatives of their official producer and Government of India undertaking National Film Development Corporation(NFDC). *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* was viewed online in the internet. Apart from first hand viewing of all the three films, intimate conversations were carried out with all the three film directors namely Dr Bhupen Hazarika, Jahnu Barua and Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia regarding their respective maiden Hindi films, two of whom had since passed away. These intimate personal conversations with the filmmakers resulted in some interesting insights into those three films as well as their overall vision and ideas about propagating the cause of Northeast India in mainstream visuals of rest of India and elsewhere. Apart from these primary sources, published interviews of the concerned filmmakers taken by others, reviews and discussions about these films published in various newspapers, periodicals, journals and books are also taken up as secondary data. In order to understand the entire gamut of filmmaking process and ideas incorporated therein apart from the sociological impacts they intended to make, various theories on cinema and sociology have been studied.

7. ANALYSIS

7.1. Theoretical Framework For The Study:

Several well established theories are tested during the present study that helped to understand the issue at hand with a better perspective. One of the theories tested, Individual Differences Theory postulates that uniqueness in characteristics in each individual determines the tastes and reactions to a given message. Thus, moods, upbringing, education, social conditioning, values, prejudices, prior beliefs, intelligence etc. play significant roles in accepting or rejecting particular media content. This leads to variations in the acceptance level corresponding to individual traits. The overall idea that comes through this theory is that a predetermined audience conditioned by past experiences and teachings over a long period of time are selective in their wants from the media about what they want to read, hear or see. Thus, it is always a challenge to throw new ideas, information or culture to a conditioned audience consisting of sets of individuals with preconceived beliefs. On the other hand, Cognitive Dissonance Theory states that conformity with the existing value system and attitudes is the choice of the majority of the people, which reinforces their views of the world. LA Festinger who coined with this theory explained that people avoid information that challenges their existing viewpoints and ideas and they seek information that conforms to their world. As opposed to this, George Gerbner who developed Cultivation Theory assumed that people generally absorb the dominant symbols, images and ideas or messages from mass media. It implies that constant exposure for long period of time by certain media will make people to accept the messages being thrust upon them by cultivating a sense of trust and belief in what is on offer.

7.2. The Three Hindi Films Directed By Filmmakers From Northeast

The Hindi films taken up for consideration in this study are: *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* directed by Dr Bhupen Hazarika, *Apeksha* directed by Jahnu Barua and *Kaalsandhya* directed by Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia. A brief summary of the films are laid out as herein below:-

7.2.1. *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*:

Bharat Ratna and Dadasaheb Phalke award winning legendary Assamese musician-filmmaker Dr. Bhupen Hazarika directed only Hindi feature film *Mera Dharam Meri Maa*, released in 1976, was a

historic enterprise for the entire Northeast India. It was the first successful effort at making an entire full-length feature film in Hindi within the geographical boundary of Northeast region. (Hazarika, 1976) The storyline of the film was based on an original story of a young Arunachali student. This Arunachal Pradesh Government produced film was entirely shot within the state of Arunachal Pradesh depicting its vibrant ethnic lifestyle and culture. The spread of Hindi as the medium of instruction in the schools of the new state by weeding out the century old connection with Northeast India's ancient lingua franca Assamese was the inherent theme of the film. Strong statements against the prevalent superstitions among the Arunachali tribes were also made in the film. A special highlight of this film was the appearance of the director Dr Hazarika as an actor delivering dialogues in Hindi and also humming songs in his famous baritone voice. (Hazarika, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika as an actor in 'Mera Dharam Meri Maa(1977)'- 1st Hindi film of Arunachal Pradesh, 1977)

7.2.2. *Apeksha*:

Award winning Assamese film director Jahnu Barua's maiden cinematic venture was simultaneously shot in two languages in 1982, Assamese and Hindi, with two different sets of actors, while a few of them starring in both the films. Both the films produced by India government undertaking National Films Development Corporation (NFDC) were conceptualized and shot with the same storyline and screenplay. While the Hindi version was named *Apeksha*, the Assamese version was called *Aparoopaa*. (Barua, 1982) In both the versions, music was scored by music legend Dr Bhupen Hazarika. The Hindi version starred popular Bollywood actor Farooque Sheikh and actress Suhasini Mulay in lead roles, with veteran Hindi film actors Girish Karnad, Kulbhushan Kharbanda together with Assamese actors like Nipon Goswami, Runu Devi and others enacting major characters. (Desk, 2014) It was the first time that such a galaxy of major Bollywood stars acted in major roles in a film directed by a person from Northeast India. The storyline of the film, developed by the director himself, was confined within the rural settings of Assam with ample footages of nearby tea estates liberally used during the development of the story. An Assamese army officer returns to his village on a long vacation to see his ailing mother, and in the process accidentally met his old flame, who was unhappily married to a busy tea planter. During his stay at his village home, he came close to his sweetheart from the past again, and also got the chance to know her husband closely. He also tasted the isolated world of luxury enjoyed by the tea planters and had firsthand experience of comparing the pathetic life led by the poor villagers, and in the process came across many other interesting characters. Eventually, his ailing mother died, and after finishing all religious rituals while he was returning back to his army life for good, he found his married ladylove waiting for him at the local railway station. She fled away from the suffocation of aristocracy and loneliness that engulfed her in her married home with the hope of starting a new life with her old lover. This interesting storyline was layered with lilting music by Dr Bhupen Hazarika, which enhanced the entire cinema viewing experience for the viewers. Despite many weaknesses in the storyline and screenplay, director Barua's trained directorial hand sailed the film through as he was technically refined during his stint at Pune's Film Institute. (Baruah, 2009) However, while the Assamese version was commercially released in theatres in Assam, the Hindi version *Apeksha* did not have the honour of theatrical release anywhere in India, except some special shows organised by NFDC together with some other films produced or financed by them. (Shedde)

7.2.3. *Kaalsandhya*:

Another prominent Assamese film director and well known storywriter-novelist Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia's only Hindi feature film *Kaalsandhya*, produced again by NFDC in 1999, remained his swan song cinematic venture. (Saikia, 1999) This prolific filmmaker could not undertake any other film project after this one before he passed away a few years later due to cancer. The main theme of the film revolves around the issue of terrorism that engulfed Assam at the fag end of the twentieth century with the sole aim of creation of an independent Assam by breaking away from Indian mainland. The film highlights the futility of terrorism and sheds light on its ill effects on the everyday lives of commoners. Popular Hindi film actor Ashish Vidyarthi played the major role of a police officer in the film with able support from a battery of leading Assamese actors and actresses. However, just like Jahnua Barua's maiden Hindi movie *Apeksha*, Dr Saikia's only Hindi film also failed to see the light of the day through pan Indian commercial release in movie theatres. Thus, only a privileged section of elites and film critics managed to view the Hindi feature film *Kaalsandhya* at special screenings.

8. FINDINGS

After analyzing the contents of the above three films, research questions are adequately answered to a large extent and interesting findings are arrived at. It is observed that all the three films under study managed to showcase different aspects of the everyday life of Northeast India. While *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* depicts the authentic tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh, both *Apeksha* and *Kaalsandhya* are set on the backdrops of Assam. The trajectory of *Apeksha* moves around Assamese village life as well as the tea plantations and the aristocracy that is nurtured within the tea estates. But, the setting of *Kaalsandhya* is urban and shows the life of middle class Assamese common men and also that of the enigmatic existence of the terrorists. Let us go into details of the films based on certain characteristics that may be assumed as variables.

8.1. Depiction Of Northeast India:

- In *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* the natural beauty of Arunachal Pradesh has been captured beautifully. Few Indian are reasonably well informed about this important Indian state bordering China and its people. In this film, local traditional customs of different Arunachali tribes are focused through the progression of the storyline. Hindi cinema viewers got a better understanding of the life and culture of the Arunachali people through this film.
- *Apeksha* depicts the typical Assamese rural setting together with the life in the large tea plantations spread all over the state. Traditional Assamese villagers' agro-based lifestyle has been captured efficiently in the film. The contrast in lifestyles and economic activities between the poor villagers and the rich tea planters and executives have been cleverly depicted by the director. (Sarmah, 2013)
- On the other hand, in *Kaalsandhya* the typical urban setting of an Assamese township has been cinematically presented to focus on the middle class life of the natives. Apart from that, hard life of extremists spent at the periphery of civil society depicting current trend in Assam and Northeast is also tactfully presented for the Hindi viewers in this film.

8.2. Showcasing Ground Realities:

- *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* projected a new dawn ushered in the newest state in India at that point of time, which was earlier called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) till the early 1970s. The central

government focused on the long neglected and isolated Northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh for the first time with the target of bringing it closer to the North Indian Hindi speaking heartland. The film cleverly depicts how Hindi language had been aggressively promoted in the entire state to elbow out the traditionally spoken link language Assamese which earlier used to bind the entire Northeast together. In order to teach Hindi in government schools of Arunachal, hordes of Hindi speaking teachers were imported to the state from North Indian Hindi speaking states. How they successfully implemented Hindi all over the state from early 1970s and relegated Assamese as link language from the state has been highlighted in the film. Apart from that, the burning issue of predominance of superstitions leading to unfortunate death of people due to illness without modern treatment is also efficiently treated in the film.

- In the film *Apeksha*, division of classes in a rural Assamese backdrop has been cleverly portrayed. While the farmers in villages are leading pathetic life amidst deprivation, leading to jealousy and tussle amongst themselves, the effluence among the tea planters in the vicinity of the poor villages made them self centered and arrogant and thus inviting jealousy and curiosity among the idle section of the villagers. That eternal tussle between poor and rich that is prevalent in Assam is the main focus in this film.
- The topical issue of extremism and deprivation of the commoners which has engulfed the entire Northeastern consciousness has been presented through an intelligent storyline marked with sensitivity in *Kaalsandhya*. Rather than an idealistic standpoint, the film tries to focus on the human aspects of the chain of events that lead to understanding of the root causes of devastations caused by deprivation leading to extremist tendencies among the local youths. The film goads viewers to be more empathic towards those having radically extreme views and strives for avoiding stereotypes.

8.3. Impact On Hindi Cinegoers:

All the three films thrive to appeal to the larger sections of Hindi film-going public in general to create a better understanding about Northeast India and its people in the rest of the country. Their sincerity in the projection of authentic true picture of the present state of the region (of the respective states in the present three cases) will draw the attention of the cinegoers. A new thought process may start with more emphasis on dialogues between the Northeasterners and rest of the Indians to generate better understanding among the entire nationhood to build up a cohesive and inclusive Indian society. The appeal of these Hindi films directed by leading filmmakers from the NE region lies in the fact that these pioneering efforts ushered in a new modern outlook of inclusiveness which is demanding attention of the rest of the Indians with assertive voices.

9. CONCLUSION

The present study brought to the fore some interesting points that may generate newer look into the entire gamut of issues relating to Northeast India and how past efforts at creating headway in better understanding of its people and issues they are facing had an impact on the mainstream India. Use of the powerful medium of cinema to showcase the Northeast and its people through humane stories in the mainstream Indian visuals by the pioneers was a novel idea which was turned into reality by so many, led by the true cultural ambassador of the Northeast Dr Bhupen Hazarika. Their historic efforts to a large extent played a major role in lessening the stereotyping tendencies among the mainstream Indians.

However, such noble efforts did not get adequate exposure and mileage that they deserve from the mainstream media, except in isolated cases.

Northeast India comes to the focus in the media only through occasional negative news like extremism, flood, earthquake or scandals. (Chongloi, 2017) Positive aspects of this land and its multi-coloured people and their culture deserve much better treatment and exposure in the mainstream media. Despite early efforts by doyens of Indian cinema from this land like Dr Hazarika, Dr Saikia and Mr Barua, showcasing Northeast did not become a trend among the filmmakers from the rest of the India. Isolated cases of some Hindi films like *Yeh Gulistan Humara*, *Rock On 2*, *Dil Se*, *Tango Charlie* or even *Mary Kom* setting their partial backdrops in the Northeast neither did full justice to the region nor its culture. In most of such cases, depiction of the region and its people remained caricaturists or at the best, stereotypical. Even Dr Bhupen Hazarika's other Hindi productions like *Ek Pal* and *Daman*, where directorial duties were performed by his subordinate Kalpana Lajmi, the depiction of local Assamese life and social ethos did not measure up to the expectations. Rather, many of the issues forcefully pushed through these films like adultery in *Ek Pal* and dowry demand in *Daman* in Assamese setting had been marked for their utter disregard to local Assamese tradition, which never encourages such illegal acts like adultery and dowry. Dr Hazarika, despite being the uncrowned king of Assamese culture and society for so long, failed in his duty to ensure authentic presentation of Assamese culture and social ethos through these Hindi films produced by him directly. Similar had been the case with another film *Tango Charlie*, where in the name of highlighting Bodo extremism, the Bodo tribe of Assam in general had been projected in very bad light. Such stereotyping of Northeast and its people continues till this day. As such, more positive efforts using all modern tools of communication are necessary to project truer picture of the region and its rich diversity. This study may hopefully shed a little light in that direction.

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