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EMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT OF INDIANS ABROAD[1]

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Indians have been sojourning abroad since ancient times. There is historical evidence of Indian-influenced colonies and kingdoms in Southeast Asia, the most notable of them being the fifteenth century A.D. Sri Vijya Empire in Indonesia (Wheatley 1961). Besides Southeast Asia, Indian cultural influence is also known to have existed in Afghanistan, Tibet and part of China. Indian scholars and entrepreneurs were in contact with their counterparts in Central Asia and the Hellenic world. Early Indian emigration, however, did not result in any significant permanent settlements overseas.

In contrast to ancient emigration, modern emigration from India was wholly a British creation. It began in 1834 when slavery was abolished in the British empire. Labour was needed to work on the sugar plantations in the various British colonies. Without dependable supplies of labour, survival of plantations would have been extremely difficult. Consequently, the British colonists followed the practice of Latin American and Cuban colonists who were importing Chinese indentured labour from the Portuguese settlement of Macao (Campbell 1969). Indian labourers had already been found useful in various colonies where as slaves and convicted prisoners they were employed in public works–roads, harbours, offices and jails (Sandhu 1969: 132-140; Tinker 1974: 44-46).[2]

In India, as Kingsley Davis (1968:99) has pointed out, "pressure to emigrate has always been great enough to provide a stream of emigrants much larger than the actual given opportunities". Large scale Indian emigration, however, did not take place until the establishment of British imperialism in India as well as many other parts of the world. Burma, for example, is a case in point where Indian emigration was numerically insignificant, and only seasonal in nature until the annexation of the Irrawaddy Delta and northern territory by the British East India Company in 1852 (Andrew 1933). Pearn (1946: 5) notes that in 1838 there were only 19 Indians in Rangoon. Similarly, Indian labour emigration to Malaysia, Ceylon, Mauritius and the West Indies and petty bourgeoisie emigration to East Africa

had to wait for British colonial settlement in these places. Thus Indian overseas emigration is obviously the result of the workings of British colonialism both in India and abroad which is highlighted by the fact that the vast majority of Indians emigrated only to the British colonies.[3]

Until the Second World war Indians emigrated mainly as indentured labourers to Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam (then a Dutch colony), South Africa, Fiji and Mauritius and as *kangani* or *maistry* labourers to Burma, Ceylon and Malaysia.[4] The migration of traders also took place, especially to Burma, Malaysia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa and Fiji. Such migration, however, was proportionately very small and became of some political significance only in African countries. This form of emigration is known as 'free' or 'passage' emigration–the nomenclature being derived from the fact that the emigrants paid their own passage and were free in all respects.

It is estimated that between 1834 and 1937 some 30 million Indians migrated to different parts of the world, while during the same period about 24 million of them returned home, resulting in the net emigration of 6 million (see Table 1).

As the figures in the table show, overseas Indian emigration was largely 'ephemeral' or transitory in character. During the period 1834-1900, the average annual emigration was 202,000, whereas for the period 1901-1937, it was 451,000.

The data in the table also indicate four major periods of fluctuations in the migration patterns. The first, from 1834 to 1915, was the period of steady increase in indentured labour emigration. In the same period the increased net migration since the early 1890s represents the added migration of *kangani/maistry* labour to Burma, Ceylon and Malaysia. The second period (1915-20) highlights not only the difficult years of the First World War but also the end of indentured emigration in 1917. In the third period (1921-30), emigration again picked up, mainly responding to the demands for labour on tea, rice and rubber plantations in Ceylon, Burma and Malaysia respectively. The largest number of Indians returned home between 1926 and 1930, perhaps foreshadowing the coming global economic depression. During the depression and post-depression era until 1937, more Indians returned home than left. The *kangani/maistry* form of emigration was stopped by 1938. By then not only was sufficient labour available in the colonies, Indian public opinion was also opposed to Indians' emigration and their mistreatment abroad.[5] Thereafter only voluntary labour, over whom the government of

Table I: Estimated Total Migration to and from India: 1834-1937 (000's)

Year	Emigrants	Returned Migrants	Net*
1834-35	62	52	50
1836-40	188	142	46
1841-45	240	167	72
1846-50	247	189	58
1851-55	357	249	108
1856-60	618	431	187
1861-65	793	594	199
1866-70	976	778	197
1871-75	1,235	958	277
1876-80	1,505	1,233	272
1881-85	1,545	1,208	337
1886-90	1,461	1,204	256
1891-95	2,326	1,536	790
1896-1900	1,962	1,268	694
1901-05	1,428	957	471
1906-10	1,864	1,482	382
1911-15	2,483	1,868	615
1916-20	2,087	1,867	220
1921-25	2,762	2,216	547
1926-30	3,298	2,857	441
1931-35	1,940	2,093	-162
1936-37	815	755	59
Total	30,191	23,941	6,250

* Net migration refers to net emigration. The figures do not always correspond to the exact difference between the first two columns because of rounding.
Source: Davis (1968:59).

of India had no control, continued to emigrate. But such migration was proportionately very small and was confined to Malaysia, and possibly Ceylon.

Following the Second World War Indian migration to the advanced industrialised countries of Europe and North America had also begun to gain momentum. The post-war economic expansion in these countries created heavy demand for skilled labour and professionals. Simultaneously, immigration laws were also relaxed in Canada and the US. This form of overseas Indian migration of skilled and educated personnels, popularly known as the "brain drain" thus resulted in the formation of sizeable Indian communities in Britain, Canada and the U.S. and other European countries (Aurora 1976; Desai 1963; Saran 1985; Tinker 1977). Since the early

1970s Indians have also been sojourning to the oil-rich West Asian countries.

Colonial Background of Indian Emigration

The historical background against which the Indian overseas emigration was intensified was the penetration of British mercantile capitalism in Asia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as a result of the communication revolution and the opening of the Suez Canal the Asian peripheral economies were fully integrated into the world capitalist system with the result that Britain earned a considerable surplus on her trade with Asia in general, and India in particular (Latham, 1978: 175).

The profits from imperial trade were invested by the British in the mines and plantations in Asia and Africa, which created a further demand for labour throughout the British Empire. While the expanding capitalist economy in the British empire created a great demand for labour and trading classes, in India a combination of the following factors led to the Indian exodus overseas:[6]

The Distress of the Small Peasantry: The impact of British colonialism in India arose from the new land policies attuned to capitalist development by the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1765 the revenue administration of Bengal had passed into the hands of the East India Company (Mukherjee 1958). The Company had fixed the land taxes at ninety per cent of the rental in Bengal and over eighty per cent in North India, rates that were excessively burden-some to the peasantry. The distress of peasantry was further accentuated by the introduction of the *zamindari* system whereby landlords were converted from rent-collectors (for ten years on 2.5% commission) into landlords in perpetuity (*vide* Permanent Land Settlement Act, 1793). In the Madras Presidency the land tenure system of *raitwari* was introduced in which *raits* or individual cultivators were the registered occupants of land and as such were free to mortgage, sell or gift their land subject to registered transaction. In the Madras Presidency the land revenues for the most part of the nineteenth century were even higher compared to Bengal.

Under these land tenure schemes, not only land transfer became easier, disputes over land also encouraged litigation, crime and corruption. Indebtedness forced many cultivators to sell or mortgage their land to the rich peasants or the money-lenders.[7] Consequently, the pauperisation of the marginal peasantry increased the number of

landless labourers who eventually joined the ranks of overseas migrants.[8] Commenting on the agrarian conditions in the nineteenth century in India, Nehru (1960: 204) writes:

> For at the basis of all this exploitation lay the policy deliberately pursued by the British in India. The destruction of cottage-industries with no effort to replace them by other kinds of industry; the driving of the unemployed artisan to the village and the consequent over-pressure on land; landlordism; the plantation system; heavy taxation on land resulting in exhorbitant rent, cruelly collected; the forcing of the peasant to the *bania* money-lender, from whose iron grip he never escaped; innumerable ejections from the land for inability to pay rent or revenue in time; and above all, the perpetual terrorism of policemen and tax-gatherers and landlords' agents; which almost destroyed all spirits and soul that he possessed.

Famines: Widespread and frequent famines and local scarcities throughout the nineteenth century and during 1905-1908 period were also a major factor in adding to the misery of rural populations, especially small cultivators, artisans (mainly native weavers), agricultural labourers and other depressed classes. The frequency of famines increased considerably after 1860. In the last four decades of the nineteenth century, the government's economic policies led to a decline in food production and a rise in food prices. On the other hand, during the same period the export of food grains increased resulting in further shortages of food grains. According to one economic historian (Bhatia 1967: vi):

> As for prevention of famine, the Government laid greater emphasis on railways, which served commercial interests of Great Britain, than on canals which were so necessary to increase food production. By legislative measures the government tried to restore the balance between creditor and debtor and between landlord and tenant, but it failed to industrialize the country, which was the ultimate remedy for unemployment and poverty. In the matter of food supplies, the compulsions of imperialism forced the Government to permit unrestricted export of food grains even during times of famine and allow their prices to be determined by the market forces of demand and supply.

The Decline of the Handicraft Industry: In the seventeenth century India was a great manufacturing power mainly because of its handicraft industry which provided employment for millions of

people. The cotton industry was especially thriving, its produce exported to a number of markets in Europe and Asia. As the British cotton industry was unable to compete with its Indian counterpart, the British government charged heavy customs duty on Indian imports into England. In 1720, Indian goods were prohibited entry into England. During the nineteenth century India imported an increasing amount of cotton goods from Britain. According to one estimate, the value of British exports in cotton goods, just over 100,000 pounds in 1813, rose to 5.2 million pounds in 1850 and 18.5 million pounds by 1896 (Charlesworth 1982: 33). This competition had a substantial negative impact on the handicraft industry in India.

Sluggish and Enclavist Industrialisation: While the handicraft industry in nineteenth century India declined, modern industrial development was late, slow, limited and enclavist. Modern industrialisation in Indian which began in the late nineteenth century was "fundamentally concentrated in three isolated enclaves–Bombay City, Calcutta and the West Bengal/Bihar coal belt–with strictly limited impact on one another and on other regions" (Charlesworth 1982: 37-8). The Madras Presidency, which in the nineteenth century had already become an important area of labour exodus, had no industrialisation even comparable to the scale of Bombay or Calcutta. Moreover, foreign capital which dominated the modern industries was not evenly and broadly invested.

There was also a marked absence of a co-ordinated government policy regarding industrial development until 1914. Indeed, in the name of *laissez faire* the colonial government adopted a "passive state policy ... with respect to industrial development" (Lamb 1955: 478). Perhaps more harmful to industrial development were the effects of the imperial connection which meant that until the First World War, Indian industry was denied any significant tariff protection. Thus, the overall progress of industrialisation during the British *Raj* remained very slow. As late as 1931, out of a total population of 353 million, only just over 1.5 million workers were employed in modern factories (Buchanan 1966: 136). Under these circumstances, it is obvious that the manufacturing sector of the colonial economy was not capable of absorbing the surplus labour force created in the rural areas.

Other Factors: Excessive dependence on agriculture, seasonal unemployment, mass illiteracy and a caste-bound occupational structure, were additional contributory factors in creating a class of proletarians, a fraction of which was compelled to seek sustenance abroad. Under these circumstances, the Indian government was

readily persuaded by the imperial and other colonial governments to export Indian labourers.

Five Patterns of Indian Emigration

Historically, five distinctive patterns of Indian emigration can be identified: (1) Indentured labour emigration, (2) *kangani/ maistry* labour emigration, (3) "Free" or "Passage" emigration, (4) "Brain-drain", or voluntary emigration to the metropolitan countries of Europe, North America and Oceania, and (5) Labour emigration to West Asia. Whereas the first three forms of emigration were colonial phenomena, the last two are the results of the inherent contradictions of the post-colonial socio-economic development of India. These patterns are briefly described below.

Indentured Labour Emigration: Indenture was a contract by which the emigrant was bound to work for a given employer for three- to five-year term, performing the task assigned to him for a specified wage (Kondapi 1951). At the end of the contract the labourer was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the colony. After ten years he was entitled to a subsidized return passage.[9]

As already mentioned, the migration of Indian indenture labour began in 1834, and was officially ended in 1920. The chief importing countries of Indian labour were the West Indian colonies, Fiji, South Africa, Mauritius, Malaysia and Ceylon. The total number of government-sponsored emigrant in each case was as follows: Guyana 240,000; Trinidad 144,000; Surinam 324,000; Mauritius 451,000; Fiji 68,000; South Africa 142,000 (Jain 1982; Nath 1970; Tinker 1977).

In the first phase beginning in 1834 the majority of emigrants were recruited in the 'hill coolie' districts of Chota Nagpur division and Bankura, Birbhum and Burdwan districts of the Bengal Presidency. Soon the recruiting areas were pushed westward into the Hindi-speaking zones of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh which were also part of the then Bengal Presidency. From the early 1870s till the end of the indenture emigration, Eastern U.P. remained the leading recruiting areas in Northern India (Tinker 1974). In South India the Tamil-speaking areas of Trichinopoly, Madura, Ramnad, Salem and Tanjore and the Telugu-speaking areas of Vizagapatnam and Ganjam were the main recruiting districts. In Bombay Presidency Ahmadnagar district was the main area of recruitment. Of the three Presidencies, Calcutta stood first in volume of recruitment and embarkation and Madras second.

On the basis of an analysis of Calcutta emigration reports, the

ratio of Hindus and Muslims appeared to represent the then all-India ratio of the two communities, i.e. 86;14 (Saha 1970: 34). Among Hindus 16 per cent belonged to higher castes, 32 per cent to agricultural intermediate castes and the rest to lower castes and 'untouchables' (Smith 1959).[10] Typical of the mode of recruitment of indentured labour, the emigrant population was predominantly male and young.

Following the completion of their indenture period some Indians preferred to settle down in these colonies. Others were compelled or lured to do so as in lieu of their guaranteed return passage to India the colonial authorities provided them with some cultivable land. Once settled as peasant proprietors Indians were soon to evolve into distinctive communities.

Kangani/maistry Labour Emigration: The *kangani* system of recruitment was used to supply South Indian labour to Malaysia and Sri Lanka and the *maistry* system to Burma. The word *kangani* is the anglicised form of the Tamil word *kankani* meaning overseer or foreman. Under this system, a *kangani* (himself an Indian immigrant) used to recruit the coolies in India paying them in advance for expenses (Jain 1970: 199). The *maistry* system was more or less similar to the *kangani* system except that the former was characterised by a gradation of middlemen-employers (the labour contractor, the head *maistry*, the charge *maistry*, the gang *maistry*) and the innumerable illegal deductions. In contradistinction to indentured labourers, coolies under these systems were legally free. There was no contract and no fixed period of service.

Kangani system began early in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and continued until its final abolition in 1938. *Maistry* system began sometimes in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. How many Indians migrated under these systems is not definitely known. In all, probably ten million Indian migrants moved back and forth between India and Burma, Ceylon and Malaysia (Sandhu 1969). The majority of Indian immigrants were Tamil-speaking Hindus, remainder being Muslims, Christians, and (in the case of Malaysia only) Sikhs (Arasaratnam 1970).

Indian emigration to Southeast Asia consisted of such groups of migrants as traders, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, salesmen, clericals, and professionals. In Malaysia, until 1957 this constituted about one-third of the total immigration. Somewhat similar situation existed in Burma, though in the case of Ceylon non-labour Indian immigration was substantially less. South Indian Chettiar Hindus were the leading Indian commercial and business community in Burma

and Malaysia (Chakravarti 1971).

'Passage' Emigration: The third form of Indian migration within the British empire was 'passage' or 'free' emigration, or the emigration of trading castes and classes. Passage emigration was predominant in South Africa as well as the East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, where Gujaratis and Panjabis immigrated largely during and after the Second World War (Bharati 1972; Kuper 1960; Morris 1968). Indian immigration in East Africa follwed the 'opening up' of East Africa by the British and other European powers. The completion of the Ugandan railway offered new economic opportunities in the hinterland as well as along the railway route.[11] Indians, mainly Gujaratis, soon established themselves as *dukanwalas* (shopkeepers). In the towns they monopolized trade and commercial activities. Indians were merchants in native produce, carters and teamsters, small contractors, money-lenders, quarry-masters, dealers in lime, sand, stone and domestic firewood, barbers, saddlers, bootmakers, nurserymen, tailors, etc. (Ghai 1965). Some of these businessmen were highly successful and quite a few of them rose to prominence.

No reliable data are available regarding the total volume of Indian migration to East Africa. However, different census reports throw some light on the growth of Indian communities in East Africa. Accordingly, there were 40,000 Indians in 1901, and 92,000 in 1931. During the war their number increased considerably and by 1963 there were about 372,000 Indians in the East African countries.

Since the mid-sixties, however, negligible volume of immigration and growing political uncertainties in East Africa have caused the number of Asian minorities to decline. In 1969 censuses of East African nations there were less than 300,000 Asian left–139,000 in Kenya, 74,000 in Uganda and 84,000 in Tanzania. Expulsion of about 70,000 Asians from Uganda in 1972 was a further setback in this regard (Ramchandani 1976).

"Brain Drain": The large-scale Indian migration to the advanced industrial societies of Europe and North America began in the late sixties, though the history of Indian emigration goes back to the early years of the twentieth century in North America and nineteenth century in Britain. The characteristic features of this type of migration have been its totally voluntary nature, and the migration of highly educated professionals and skilled or semi-skilled industrial workers.

Early Indian migrants who went to settle down in Britain and North America were mainly the Sikhs. The Sikhs still constitute the single largest ethnic group in Britain, Canada and the US, although

now more and more non-Sikhs are also migrating. Currently, there are about two million people of Indian origin in Europe, North America and Oceania. In the US the majority of Indians are educated professionals–scientists, engineers, doctors, etc. In Britain and Canada Indian communities are occupationally more diversified and therefore relatively less well off.

Labour Emigration to West Asia: Fifth and the final emigration pattern consists of the Indian migration to West Asia. This emigration pattern differs from the previous ones in the sense that all migrants are generally 'contract' workers and are not allowed to settle permanently in the countries of their destination. If there are any permanently settled Indian communities in West Asia, as yet we do not know sociologically much about them.

The labour market in West Asia being highly transitory, the skill composition as well as the volume of Indian emigrant workforce varies from time to time. Thus in the early 1970s there were only about 50,000 Indians in the region. Since then as a result of the booming oil economy and the shortage of indigenous skilled and unskilled manpower, there has been a phenomenal increase in the total volume of Indian migration. Whereas in 1975 there were about 150,000 Indian "workers" in West Asia, their number increased to 800,000 in 1983 and 913,000 in 1984. Keralites constitute the major group of Indian immigrants to West Asia. The skill composition of emigrant workforce is dominated by unskilled and semi-skilled workers followed by administrative staff and skilled workers (Pant 1987). Till recently, the West Asian migrants were the major source of remittance and foreign exchange to India.

Conclusion

In sum, this brief survey of overseas Indian emigration highlights the socio-economic conditions of colonial India in fostering substantial pressures for Indian emigration abroad. Under British colonialism, Indian agriculture continued to stagnate, the handicraft industry declined, and an already poor country was subjected to excessive economic drain which retarded indigenous capital formation and thereby the growth of any significant industrialization. Against this backdrop a combination of factors like famines in the second half of the nineteenth century, unemployment and ignorance of the agrarian masses, and trickery on the part of the recruiting agents played its part in stimulating Indian emigration abroad.

It needs hardly to be emphasized that Indian labour and non-

labour immigration vitally fulfilled the economic needs of British colonialism. Indian immigrants, however, were welcome only in subservient economic roles–roles which the natives as well as the white colonists could not perform. Whenever Indians tried to compete with whites, as within trading activities or government services, attempts were made to block their progress. It was for this reason that labour immigration was encouraged, while passage immigration was usually resented.

If the socio-economic conditions resulting from British colonialism in India was a factor behind the Indian exodus abroad, this did not change much after India's independence. Western neo-colonialism continued and attempts to build India as a "mirror image" of the West resulted only in the growing economic inequalities on the one hand and the "revolution of rising expectations" on the other. Lopsided development of education which produced surplus skilled manpower (especially engineers, doctors, scientists and managers) against the background of unfulfilled "expectations" led to the "brain drain" type of emigration. At the same time, West Asian booming oil economy since the mid-1970s encouraged labour emigration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who were unable to find gainful employment in the stagnating Indian economy.

Thanks to the colonial legacy of Indian emigration, today Indians are spread virtually all over the globe. However, the major overseas Indian communities (along with their current population estimates) can be located in the following countries: Burma 250,000; Canada 350,000; Fiji 300,000; Guyana 400,000; Jamaica 50,000; Kenya 80,000; Malaysia 1.4 million; Mauritius 750,000; Nepal 3.5 million; Netherlands 100,000; Singapore 200,000; South Africa 900,000; Sri Lanka 1.5 million; Surinam 200,000; Tanzania 60,000; Trinidad and Tobago 600,000; the UK 1.0 million; the US 600,000. These are all settled Indian communities. Additionally, there are about one million contract workers in the West Asian countries.[12] In all, currently about 15.0 million Indians are living and/or working abroad.

NOTES

1. The article is mainly based on a chapter in my Ph.D. (Sociology) thesis "Colonialism, Class and Race Relations: The Case of Overseas Indians" which was submitted to the Carleton University of Ottawa, Canada (Jain 1985).
2. About Indian convicts in Mauritius Charles Darwin, on his voyage round the world, observed in 1837: "Convicts from India are banished here for life; of them at present there are about eight hundred who are employed in various public works. .... These convicts are generally quiet and well conducted; from their outward conduct, their cleanliness, and faithful observance of their strange religious

enactments, it was impossible to look at these men with the same eyes as our wretched convicts in New South wales" (quoted in Tinker 1974: 45-6). This description of convicts is in sharp contrast to the usual description of coolies presented by white planters, missionaries and officials.

3. As a result of the growth of the tea industry in Assam, internal migration was also stimulated from the 1860s onwards. In fact this internal migration to Assam was much larger than the overseas emigration under indenture. According to one estimate, in the period between 1870 and 1900 about 700,000 to 750,000 recruits went to Assam to work on the tea estates on a seasonal or long-term basis (Tinker 1974:50). This kind of migration continued into the twentieth century. "In 1931 there were 900,000 of the coolie class employed in the estates and 500,000 outside" (Latham 1981: 134-5). Although internal migration was larger compared to indentured emigration, it was insignifcant compared to the volume of emigration outside the country, or to the population as a whole (Kumar 1965: 133).
4. Various forms of emigration are described in Section 3 of this paper.
5. In arousing public opinion in India about the mistreatment of overseas Indians, Gandhi's role was particularly important. He had lived in South Africa for 21 years (1893-1914) and fought for the civil rights of Indians (Gandhi 1940).
6. There were tremendous regional and/or local variations in India in terms of pre-colonial socio-economic conditions and subsequent tolonial formations. Therefore, generalisations regarding the following factors are highly tentative and simplistic.
7. In addition to traditional *bania* money-lenders, the rich peasantry was also involved in banking and money-lending. This aspect of the economic stratification of nineteenth century peasantry in India was little recognised until recently (see Charlesworth 1982: 28-30).
8. Landless labourers were not necessarily the creation of British colonialism in India. They existed even in pre-British India and generally belonged to lower castes (Breman 1974; Kumar 1965).
9. In the case of Fiji the system was known as the *girmitiya* and the labourers as *girmitiyas*. *Girmitiyas* means "the ones who came on an agreement (i.e. indenture, the word 'agreement' being rendered as *girmit* in Indian popular speech" (see Lal 1983).
10. In a similar analysis of Indian Emigration to Fiji, between 1879 and 1916, Gillion (1956: 152) computes the following distribution of caste and communities: Hindus 85.3% (Brahmins and other high castes 16.1%; Agricultural castes 31.3%; Artisan castes 6.7%; ;Low castes and outcastes 31.2%); Muslims 14.6%; Christians 0.1%.
11. East Africa too had its share of Indian indentured labour. According to one estimate, mainly between 1896 and 1902 about 32,000 workers were exported to East Africa in connection with the construction of the Uganda railways, of whom all but 6,724 were either repatriated, invalidated or had died (Mangat 1969; 39).
12. These are updated figures based on earlier estimates for the year 1980-81 (see Jain 1982).

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