



Nationalism and peasant movements

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Abstract

Peasant movements and nationalism have historically played a major role in forming sociopolitical contexts worldwide. From colonial times to the present, India's socio-political dynamics have been influenced by the intimate ties between nationalism and peasant movements. Important uprisings like the Telangana Rebellion (1946–51), the Champaran Satyagraha (1917), the Indigo Revolt (1859–60), and post-independence agrarian movements are covered. This essay explores the intersection of peasant movements and nationalist ideas, highlighting the ways in which agrarian cultures have influenced political transformation, fought against oppressive state structures and colonialism, rural dissatisfaction and contributed to nation-building processes. The study also examines the complex relationship between popular agrarian movements and elite-centered nationalism, citing instances in which peasant movements either aligned with or diverged from the goals of mainstream nationalism. Targeting contemporary agrarian issues, the article also explores the development of peasant action in post-colonial India. This study highlights the ongoing importance of peasant movements in shaping India's national identity and policy-making frameworks by employing historical and analytical perspectives.

Keywords: Peasant movements, nationalism, colonialism, resistance, freedom struggle, exploitation.

Introduction

Nationalism and peasant movements have played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of many nations, particularly in the context of anti-colonial struggles and agrarian reforms. The rise of nationalism often found strong support among the peasantry, who formed the backbone of many revolutionary and resistance movements. These movements emerged as a response to economic exploitation, feudal oppression, colonial policies, and socio-political injustices. In many countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, peasants were among the most affected by colonial land policies, high taxation, forced labour and economic hardship. Their grievances often led to organized resistance, which, over time, merged with nationalist struggles. Leaders and intellectuals recognized the power of the peasantry in mass mobilization, integrating their struggles into broader national liberation movements. In India, for example, the nationalist movement against British rule saw significant participation from peasants in movements such as the Indigo Revolt, the Champaran Satyagraha, and the Telangana Rebellion. Similarly, in China, the Communist Revolution was deeply rooted in peasant mobilization, and in Latin America, agrarian movements led to major land reforms.

The establishment of colonial rule in Bengal in 1757 triggered resistance from many sections of Indian people, including the peasantry. The peasants' resistance to colonial exploitation and intervention in their lives took various forms ranging from everyday resistance to rebellion. For about a century, these resistance movements were led by dispossessed zamindars, local notables, monks and other religious leaders, and peasant or tribal leaders such as Birsa Munda. These movements culminated in the general revolt against British rule in 1857. Some important peasant rebellions occurred till the end of the century, such as Munda rebellion. However, after 1857, we find increasing involvement of middle-class, modern educated persons in peasant resistance movements. As the idea of nationalism

gripped the persons educated in modern system, these ideas, in some form or the other, were carried to the peasantry also. The Peasants were the worst sufferers in Colonial India, Peasant Movements are a part of social movements against British atrocities in the 18th and the British Colonial period. These movements were a result of the aggressive British economic policies based on mercantilism. This policy caused the commercialisation of agriculture, which altered the mode of production and disrupted traditional agrarian relationships in India. Various land revenue settlements that made the land a tradable entity as well as deforestation for cash crops were the cause of peasant movements that were both social unrest against landlords and moneylenders and civil unrest against the British. The Peasant movements didn't have a strong organisation at first but as they integrated into the freedom movement, many political parties took charge of them and helped them gain popularity.

Definition and concept of nationalism

Definition: Nationalism is a political movement and philosophy that supports the interests, culture, and identity of a single nation or group of people who share traits such as language, history, customs, and geography. Nationalism is the idea that a country should have autonomy and sovereignty so that its citizens will be loyal to and proud of their national identity. Nationalism has dominated the creation of our modern world throughout its history. Because it opposed kings and foreign colonisation, it gained prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries and peaked during the French and American Revolutions. The idea that the kindred should rule themselves rather than foreign powers or colonial powers became a powerful force behind independence movements all across the world.

Concept of Nationalism: Nationalism has had a significant role in inspiring political movements, conflicts, and

revolutions throughout history. It can be interpreted from a variety of angles and shows up in many ways:

1. **Cultural Nationalism:** A shared cultural background, language, customs, and traditions serve as the foundation for this kind of nationalism. It seeks to preserve and advance a country's unique identity. Cultural nationalism includes, for example, efforts to preserve historic practices or bring back native languages.
2. **Political Nationalism:** This kind of nationalism highlights the desire for political independence and self-government. It served as a catalyst for anti-colonial movements that aspired to independence from British rule, such as Mahatma Gandhi's Indian freedom movement.
3. **Ethnic Nationalism:** The idea that a nation is bound together by shared lineage, race, or ethnicity is the foundation of ethnic nationalism. Although it encourages unity among members of the same ethnic group, it can occasionally lead to discriminatory actions against minorities.
4. **Civic Nationalism:** Civic nationalism, as opposed to ethnic nationalism, is based on citizenship and political principles rather than race or culture. It believes in equality, democracy, and the rule of law. When people from diverse origins unite under a common national identity, the United States is sometimes cited as an example of civic nationalism.
5. **Economic Nationalism:** Economic independence and the protection of home industry from foreign competition are the main goals of this kind of nationalism. Policies such as import restrictions, taxes, and supporting local companies are examples of economic nationalism.
6. Nationalism is a complex and potent ideology that has shaped nations' political, cultural, and economic landscapes across time. While nationalism encourages solidarity and patriotism, when taken too far, it can also incite conflict and violence. Examining nationalism's impact on modern countries and international relations is made easier by being aware of its various manifestations.

The condition of the peasants under colonialism

Peasant movements in colonial India emerged mostly as a result of the numerous modifications the British made to the nation's agrarian system. The British implemented new land revenue laws that largely promoted private land ownership, upending the pre-colonial system of rights and entitlements in the land. An increasing amount of money was needed for the East India Company's expansionist conflicts. The primary source of income was agriculture. The best bidders were given the task of collecting income when a revenue farming system was first implemented. Extreme peasant exploitation, starvation and poverty, and public upheaval resulted from this. Later, three land revenue systems—Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari—were implemented throughout India to improve the regularity of land income collection. All of this led to the zamindars taking even more

money from the tenants because the revenue demand in the permanently populated area was set at a very high level. A clause allowing for periodic revisions in Ryotwari areas led to rent increases every few years, burdening the peasants and preventing them from saving money. The peasants were compelled to borrow from moneylenders due to the heavy tax load and the rigorous time-bound collection requirements, which were unforgiving even during difficult circumstances. The loss of peasants' land sovereignty grew throughout time as a result of this debt.

The structure of land relations was one of the major alterations that colonialism gradually brought about in the rural areas. New institutions and economic relationships replaced traditional ones, with agricultural workers, sharecroppers, and tenants-at-will at the bottom and absentee landlords and moneylenders at the top. Between the state and the peasants, the number of middlemen increased astronomically. The peasantry became poorer, agricultural productivity decreased, agricultural output stagnated, and the amount of food available per person decreased. The majority of lands were given to landlords due to the colonial emphasis on precise private property boundaries, which caused hardship for the peasant-cultivators. As a result, by 1947, the majority of arable land was controlled by several kinds of landowners, with absentee landlords being one crucial group. A lot of moneylenders ended up becoming landlords. Upper landlords also held a disproportionate amount of land. Consequently, in UP in the 1930s, only 1.5% of landlords owned 58% of the land. With an average ownership of 1228 acres per estate, 13.8% of landlords in Bengal province controlled 39.3% of the land.

The growing influence of usurers, who were an essential component of the colonial surplus extraction cycle, was another significant development in the rural areas. Even though the peasants had to live with debt for the majority of their life, the moneylender made sure that the revenue was given to the colonial administration on schedule. Additionally, the usurer provided loans for the production and export of commercial crops. A lot of landlords also made loans. As a result, throughout the colonial era, both landowners and moneylenders became stronger and were able to take whatever profits the peasants might have received from the sale of their commercial crops. As a result of these changes, the peasantry became more distinct and most of them were immiserated. Peasant proprietors made up only 29% of the rural population; the remaining 60% were agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, and tenants-at-will.

Factors of peasant movements

The central factor of the peasant movements in India was the British economic policy and its consequences. These factors are described here:

Stagnation of agriculture: The colonial period's changes to the agrarian structure led to the impoverishment of the Indian peasantry due to:

- Colonial economic policies
- Ruin of the handicrafts resulting in overcrowding of land
- The new land revenue system
- The colonial administrative and judicial system

Land revenue settlements and their effects: Three land revenue systems were introduced in various parts of India to improve the regularity of land revenue collection: Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari. In all of this, the revenue demand in permanently settled areas was set at a very high level, which led the zamindars to demand even more money from the tenants. There was a provision for periodic revision which resulted in an increase in rent every few years.

Commercialization of agriculture: Rural hardship resulted from British policies that switched subsistence farming to income crops including cotton, jute, and indigo. Due to their dependence on market forces, peasants were vulnerable to famines and price drops. This was one of the causes of the Champaran Satyagraha (1917) and the Indigo Revolt (1859-60). The late nineteenth century saw the development of commercialised agriculture, and the land became a marketable commodity.

Indebtedness and Usury: High burden of taxes and strict collection in time, without remission even in times of adversity, forced the peasants to borrow from moneylenders. Over time, this indebtedness resulted in the increasing loss of peasants control of the land. The Deccan Riots (1875) in Maharashtra were a direct response to moneylenders' exploitative activities.

High interest rate of Zamindars: Usurers and zamindars (landlords) controlled vast tracts of land and demanded exorbitant rents from peasants. Tenant farmers were thus severely exploited. In response to these exploitations, movements like the Moplah Rebellion (Kerala), Bardoli Satyagraha (Gujarat), and Tebhaga Movement (Bengal) arose.

Famines and food scarcity: Poor agricultural policies, excessive taxes, and merchant hoarding were the causes of subsequent famines, including the Great Bengal Famine (1770) and the Bengal Famine (1943). As a result of the periodic recurrence of famines and the economic depression that occurred in the final decades of the 19th century, the situation in rural areas became even worse, resulting in many peasant uprisings.

High Rent and Forced labour: Both the British government and landlords regularly subjected peasants to illegal forced labour and excessive rent. Mahatma Gandhi's 1917 Champaran Satyagraha was a revolt against the forced indigo plantation system that the Bihar peasants were compelled to live under.

Economic Depression and World Wars: Peasants were forced into extreme poverty as a result of falling agricultural commodity prices brought on by global economic crises, especially the Great Depression of 1929. In addition, mandatory grain purchases and inflation during World Wars I and II exacerbated their problems and led to more rural unrest in India.

Decline of Traditional Industries: Traditional handicrafts and rural industries declined as a result of the British encouragement of industrial goods, forcing small farmers and artisans to turn to agriculture in order to survive.

Agrarian uprisings resulted from the resulting land fragmentation, unemployment, and increasing hardship.

Peasant movements in India- phases

1. The Initial Phase (1857-1921)

The peasant movement became the main force behind agrarian movements, fighting directly for their own demands, which were aimed at resolving specific grievances and achieving specific, limited goals. The peasant movement underwent a complete change in direction in the 20th century when national parties like the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India took up the peasant movement and supported their efforts, putting the peasant's concerns into the larger national interest. Notable figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, the Socialist faction of the Congress, and communists were all instrumental in this direction.

Indigo Revolt (1859-1862)

The European planters encouraged the peasants to produce Indigo rather than food crops in order to boost their revenues. The low prices for growing indigo were the main reason why the farmers were unhappy-

- Indigo didn't make good money.
- Planting indigo reduced soil fertility.
- Indigo was not lucrative.

An important peasant rebellion against the repressive indigo planters took place in Bengal during the Indigo Revolt (1859-60). Because indigo was so valuable in Europe, British planters made growers grow it rather than food crops. The planters used brutal methods like physical coercion, burning crops, and kidnapping farmers' families. In response, Bengali peasants launched a resistance movement under the leadership of Bishnucharan Biswas and Digambar Biswas, starting in the villages of Gobindapur and Chanugacha in the Nadia district. Murshidabad, Birbhum, Burdwan, Pabna, Khulna, and Narail were rapidly affected by the uprising. With the help of zamindars, moneylenders, and ex-workers, the peasantry attacked indigo stores, held open trials, and put some planters to death. A lot of planters ran away to avoid consequences. Along with the assistance of Christian missionaries and the Bengal intelligentsia, the exceptional solidarity between Hindu and Muslim peasants played a significant role in this triumph. The government's response was somewhat mild in contrast to previous revolutions. An important turning point in India's agrarian movements, the uprising showed the strength of organised protest and peasant resistance.

Pabna Movement (1873-1885)

The Pabna Revolt (1873-74) was a significant peasant rebellion against moneylenders and exploitative landowners in the Pabna district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh). Peasants, primarily Muslim sharecroppers and tenant farmers, were subjected to arbitrary taxes, exorbitant rents, and high-interest loans. The famines of 1873-1874 made matters worse by causing widespread poverty and food shortages, which heightened resentment. Under the leadership of village elders and Muslim religious leaders, the peasants staged violent clashes, rent strikes, and rallies against landowners and colonial authorities without the backing of the government. The uprising was notable for the large number of participants, which brought peasants

together across geographical and caste boundaries. Inspiring subsequent peasant movements and increasing political consciousness among Bengali peasants were two important outcomes of the Pabna Revolt. It also emphasised how local elders and Muslim religious leaders play a key role in organising opposition. This led to the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which regulated land tenure and limited the authority of landlords. In colonial India, its history continues to stand as a testament to the peasant movement's quest for agrarian rights and resistance to injustice.

Deccan Riots (1875)

A notable peasant rebellion in British India, the Deccan Riots of 1875, was sparked by harsh colonial policies and economic hardship. The British East India Company levied astronomical land taxes on the predominantly agrarian Deccan, which were raised by 50% in 1867. Peasants were driven into crippling debt by the Ryotwari system and exploitative moneylenders, mostly Gujarati and Marwari bankers. Farmers lost their property and were compelled to work as a result of their inability to pay taxes because of their erratic agricultural yields. The British and affluent landowners were given preference in the socioeconomic structure, leaving common peasants open to serious exploitation. Peasants rebelled against arbitrary tax demands, focussing on landlords, moneylenders, and British officials. Despite the dispersed opposition, violence broke out and spread throughout Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. The Deccan Riot Inquiry Commission, which the British established in 1877, blamed the uprising on debt and poverty. In 1879, the government passed the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act to quell the discontent and save farmers from unscrupulous moneylenders.

Champaran Satyagraha (1917-18)

Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded India's first civil disobedience movement, the Champaran Satyagraha (1917), in the Champaran district of Bihar. Under the harsh adolescent Kathia system, peasants in the area were compelled to cultivate indigo, which left them in abject poverty. Particularly after German synthetic dyes decreased the need for indigo, European planters took advantage of farmers by extorting exorbitant rents and unlawful dues. Even during famines, the British government imposed high levies on peasants. Gandhi was asked to Champaran to conduct an investigation by Rajkumar Shukla, a local farmer. British officials ordered him to depart when he arrived with Rajendra Prasad, Mazharul Haq, Mahadev Desai, Narhari Parekh, and J.B. Kripalani.

Gandhi's decision to reject and risk arrest was one of the first instances of civil disobedience in Indian history. Gandhi was eventually permitted to continue by the British, which prompted an official investigation. This led to the abolition of the teen Kathia system and, as a compromise, the payment of only 25% of the total sum to farmers for unlawful taxes. Peasant rights were formally safeguarded on May 1st, 1918, by the Champaran Agrarian Act. Gandhi's leadership in India's fight for independence was established by this campaign, which also made satyagraha a potent weapon against colonial oppression.

Kheda satyagraha (1918)

Mahatma Gandhi launched the first known non-cooperation movement, the Kheda Satyagraha (1918), to protest an

unjust 23% tax increase that Gujarat's Kheda district farmers were forced to pay despite a devastating crop failure and an outbreak of cholera and plague. With the help of Gandhi's close friends Indulal Yagnik, Shankarlal Banker, Mahadev Desai, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Kheda peasant-Patidar group spearheaded the demonstration. By touring areas and mobilising farmers, Patel was instrumental in coordinating the resistance. Farmers who produced less than one-fourth of the average yield were eligible for tax remission under the British Revenue Code, but the government declined to provide it. The British government finally gave in to pressure and agreed to lower the tax rate, release confiscated property, and halt taxes for two years. Gandhi's satyagraha technique was further solidified as a potent instrument of resistance, and Sardar Patel's leadership was reinforced by the movement's success. An important turning point in India's independence movement, the Kheda Satyagraha proved the value of concerted, nonviolent resistance.

Moplah Rebellion (1921)

Kerala's Mappila Muslims violently rebelled against British rule and Hindu landlords in Malabar during the Moplah Rebellion. The Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement, which was started by the Indian National Congress in 1919, had an impact on the uprising that occurred in August 1921. The insurrection began as guerilla warfare against landowners and developed into a full-scale uprising under the leadership of Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji. Six Malabar taluks were placed under martial law by the British, which resulted in widespread violence, intercommunal disputes, property destruction, and Hindu persecution. Trade and agriculture in the Malabar region were severely damaged, and tens of thousands of people died. In addition to uprooting more than a million Hindus, the uprising exacerbated religious tensions. The Malabar Special Force was eventually established by the British to put an end to the uprising. The Waggon Tragedy (November 1921), in which 67 Moplah inmates starved to death on their transfer to Podanur Central Prison, is among the crackdown's most notorious events. The rebels' goal of establishing a Khilafat administration caused division among the local populace and ran afoul of Malabar's nationalist movement.

The Second Phase (1923-1946)

Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)

In Bardoli Taluka, Gujarat, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel led a significant nonviolent tax uprising known as the Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928. Despite the disastrous floods and famines that had badly affected farmers, the campaign was started in reaction to an unfair 22% tax hike imposed by the Bombay Presidency. Bardoli's peasants urged Patel to spearhead a campaign of civil disobedience by refusing to pay taxes after the government refused to reevaluate the tax increase. Patel organised volunteers from other religious communities, such as Muslims, Hindus, and Parsis, into organisations that campaigned, gave speeches, and raised awareness about the movement after confirming the farmers' commitment to nonviolence. The women of Bardoli gave Patel the title "Sardar" during this revolution, in which women played a pivotal role. Peasants fled their communities before government raids to thwart attempts at land seizure, making it impossible for officials to confiscate property. Fearing significant unrest, the British established

the Maxwell-Broomfield Commission, which lowered the tax rate to 6.03% and eventually released seized lands. The success of the Bardoli Satyagraha solidified the Civil Disobedience Movement and made Sardar Patel a national leader, demonstrating the value of coordinated, peaceful resistance in India's fight for independence.

All India Kisan Sabha (1936)

The Communist Party of India's (CPI) peasant wing is called the All India Kisan Sabha. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati served as its first president when it was established in 1936 during the Indian National Congress's Lucknow session. In colonial India, the Sabha was a significant peasant movement that promoted debt relief, land rights, and an end to landlordism. N.G. Ranga, Indulal Yagnik, Sohan Singh Bhakna, Z.A. Ahmed, Ram Manohar Lohia, and Rahul Sankrityayan were among the movement's prominent figures. By October 1937, the red flag was chosen as the symbol of the Kisan Manifesto, which called for the debt cancellation and the dismantling of the Zamindari regime. Due to landowner repression, the Sabha finally adopted a more combative posture after initially advocating for concord between landlords and peasants. At the 1938 Haripura Session, a schism developed between the Congress and the Kisan Sabha when the Congress forbade its members from joining the Sabha. By May 1942, the Sabha was completely controlled by the Communist Party and refused to take part in the Quit India Movement (August 1942), instead endorsing the British "People's War" program.

Tebhaga Movement (1946-47)

The Bangiya Pradeshik Kisan Sabha (BPKS), the peasant front of the Communist Party of India, was the leader of the Tebhaga Movement, a notable peasant uprising in Bengal. The term "three shares of the crop," which refers to the oppressive sharecropping system in which tenants were required to donate 50% of their product to landlords, gave rise to the movement. The famine in Bengal in 1943 made their situation worse and fuelled peasant dissatisfaction. More unrest was stoked when the Flood Commission suggested that sharecroppers should get two-thirds of their produce rather than half, although this suggestion was never carried out. With the catchphrase "Adhi noy, Tebhaga chai" (We want two-thirds), the movement expanded throughout Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Khulna. The colonial government responded by siding with landlords, sending the police, which resulted in violent altercations and arrests. The movement began to wane by the middle of 1947 as a result of internal strife, government persecution, and political shifts brought on by India's approaching independence. The Tebhaga Movement left a lasting impression even though its short-term objectives were not met. It promoted land reforms, emancipated women, and raised the political consciousness of peasants. It joined the larger wave of peasant movements that influenced India's independence and land reform laws, and it continues to stand as a symbol of rural resistance to economic exploitation.

Telangana Movement (1946-1952)

The Communist Party of India (CPI) spearheaded the Telangana Movement, an armed peasant rebellion against

the repressive landlordism of the authoritarian Nizam of Hyderabad. Peasants had to deal with high taxes, forced work (vetty), and moneylenders taking their land. In response, guerilla groups were established to oppose landlords and the Nizam's razakar militias, and about 3,000 villages established rival administrations. Deshmukh and Deshpande intermediaries enforced high land taxes under the exploitative Khalsa (Ryotwari) system, which fuelled the movement. Peasants were forced into constant labour under the Bhagela system, which was similar to debt slavery. The Nizam, Razakars, and police all surrendered within a week after the Indian Army stepped in on September 13, 1948. The military administration responded by enacting the Jagir Abolition Regulation (1949) and other land reforms. Due to rural misery, a lack of coordination, and military repression, the movement had faded by 1950. Following discussions with the Congress government, the CPI formally ended the movement on October 21, 1951.

Conclusion

In India, peasant movements have significantly influenced the socio-economic and political climate of the nation. These movements, which have their roots in the agricultural community's struggles, have made a substantial contribution to improvements in rural labour conditions, debt relief, tenancy rights, and land ownership. Peasant uprisings have shaped government policy, bolstered rural self-assertion, and advanced Indian agriculture generally from the colonial era to the post-independence age. Peasant movements arose during the colonial era in reaction to exploitative regimes like the British-imposed Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari land revenue settlements. Peasants' intense hatred of repressive landowners and colonial authorities was reflected in the Deccan Riots (1875), the Indigo Rebellion (1859–60), and other tribal uprisings. These campaigns brought attention to how exploitative British rule was and were essential in inspiring rural communities to resist as a group. Peasant battles were even more intense with the rise of the nationalist movement in the early 20th century. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and others, the Champaran Satyagraha (1917), Kheda Satyagraha (1918), and Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) illustrated the effectiveness of peaceful resistance in resolving the complaints of peasants. Indian farmers' voices were amplified by the establishment of groups like the Kisan Sabha, which called for improved land rights, equitable compensation, and defence against exploitation.

These movements were crucial in uniting rural populations for collective action and exposed the exploitative nature of British authority. Peasant disputes were further exacerbated by the emergence of the nationalist movement in the early 20th century. Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders organised the Champaran Satyagraha (1917), Kheda Satyagraha (1918), and Bardoli Satyagraha (1928), which demonstrated the effectiveness of peaceful resistance in resolving farmer complaints. The creation of groups like the Kisan Sabha strengthened the voice of Indian farmers, who demanded better land rights, fair compensation, and protection against exploitation. The nature of peasant movements changed in the years following independence. While earlier movements focused on colonial oppression, post-1947 activities mostly focused on opposition to neoliberal agricultural policies, minimum wages, just prices, and land reforms. Land redistribution was promoted by movements such as the

Telangana Rebellion, which led to significant legislative changes. Peasant movements in India have been instrumental in bringing about significant social and economic reforms. They have challenged feudalism, colonial exploitation, and capitalist policies that threaten rural livelihoods. These movements continue to evolve, adapting to contemporary challenges and striving for a more just and equitable agrarian system

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