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The Pastness of the Present and the Presentness of the Past: A Study of Nav Bajwa's Film *Radua*

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Introduction- The present paper is an attemp t to locate the cultural production of the film in relation to the dialectical relationship between the past and the present. The paper has analyzed Nav Bajwa's film *Radua* (2018) as a manifestation of this interconnection by situating it in the nuanced space formed by the confluence of moral codes of medieval Punjab and undivided Punjab on the one hand and the power structures of contemporary Punjab on the other.

The film, as a representational form, always plays a key role in the constellation of images and representations through which a populace experiences reality. As a genre, the film is, in fact, a peculiar confluence of human endeavor and technology that animates objects through the combination of light and speed. This combination of light and speed, and the ability of the camera to capture the real world with all its nuances qualify it as an art form that generally has an immediate impact on the consciousness of the viewers. The innate mass appeal of the film also assigns it a peculiar pedagogic ability. At the same time, the film that involves huge capital and the essential function of 'showing' cannot be overtly political, still, it cannot help carrying cracks in its symbolic order, exposing the political unconscious of the time.

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I. Introduction

The present paper is an attempt to locate the cultural production of the film in relation to the dialectical relationship between the past and the present. The paper has analyzed Nav Bajwa's film *Radua* (2018) as a manifestation of this interconnection by situating it in the nuanced space formed by the confluence of moral codes of medieval Punjab and undivided Punjab on the one hand and the power structures of contemporary Punjab on the other.

The film, as a representational form, always plays a key role in the constellation of images and representations through which a populace experiences reality. As a genre, the film is, in fact, a peculiar confluence of human endeavor and technology that animates objects through the combination of light and speed. This combination of light and speed, and the ability of the camera to capture the real world with all its nuances qualify it as an art form that generally has an immediate impact on the consciousness of the viewers. The innate mass appeal of the film also assigns it a peculiar pedagogic ability. At the same time, the film that involves huge capital and the essential function of 'showing' cannot be overtly political, still, it cannot help carrying cracks in its symbolic order, exposing the political unconscious of the time. As a part of cultural production, carrying a significant impact on the popular consciousness and being a partner in narratives constituting reality, film is a route from the cultural to the political. According to Jyotika Virdi, film as a genre is space where the political and the social intersect, addressing the issues that trouble a populace. She says:

> The interplay between the texts and their social context entails contests among different lobbies affecting contemporary culture. Popular commercial films deal with the same political and cultural issues using a constellation of myths, utopias, wishes, escapism and fantasies. (23)

The genre of film, therefore, always works as a site where the politics of major constitutive categories of a populace's social and historical context is played out by using a confluence of myths, desires, utopias, escapism and even fantasies. Film interacts with the immediate reality in its way as per its aesthetical, epistemological and ideological imperatives. Technology, with the apparatus of the camera as a key ingredient, plays important role in this interaction. The distinct quality of the camera to capture images in motion renders it a peculiar artistic essence and helps it share a peculiar relationship with the consciousness as well as the unconscious of the audience. It is through a certain set of technology that film enters into a relationship with socio-economic and political reality. The moving pictures mediating through the agency of camera become site, where the personal, the cultural and the political contest, interrogate and finally intermingle with each other. In other words, the visual in the film is a route from the personal to the political. However, it is easier for visual to bury and displace the peculiar play of desires, wishes and anxiety as compared to the written word. It is done by using a complex network of time and space and a convoluted interaction of that time and space with the moral universe built by neutralizing the direct intervention of the immediate historical circumstances. Therefore, the evident traces of the historical are eliminated from the consciousness of the text, only to be relegated to its unconscious.

In other words, the reality experienced is narrated through already codified narrative structures that veil different dimensions and nuances of the prevailing reality. This is how the pervasive social system is kept intact and its contradictions are hidden in the deeper layers of the narrative structures. However, a point of caution is a must here. The above arguments have not been presented to conclude that the representational mode of the film is a historical, existing in a trans-historical time and space. It is not possible for any representational mode to do so. The point to be made here is that in the representational mode of film, there is a constant relay of context from the immediate to the mythological, through a peculiar presentation of time and space, to avoid any explicit reference to the real political and historical events of its time.

Punjabi film, with its distinct regional identity and peculiar relation of the region within the Indian nation-state, also employs the above-stated confluence of myths, desires, utopias, escapism and fantasies to

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represent reality. There is hardly any doubt that the already codified narrative structures through which reality is represented show a distinct mark of the prevailing social reality. But these codes also manifest the larger structures that are part of the collective consciousness of a populace. Therefore, the cultural matrix that scripts the textual space of Punjabi film always has a fascination for medieval Punjab or undivided Punjab. The moral universe or the grammar of narrative codes that structure the narration in Punjabi film always draw inspiration from the cultural codes of the above stated periods. The parameter of masculinity, feminine virtues, valor or chivalry is defined in tropes, symbols and idiom imbibed in these periods.

This persistent fascination for medieval or undivided Punjab has multiple material causes. Even in the 21st century, Punjabi society is predominantly an agrarian society, where the peasantry is situated at the heart of the socio-economic and political formation of the society. This peasant class-cum-caste, which enjoys cultural hegemony in the region, is still strongly imbibed in the values of the medieval age, exhibiting strong fascination for its world view. Even the rise of capitalism in Punjab was affected through agriculture, primarily through commercialization of agriculture by the British. There was no 'classical capitalism' that would have transformed the agrarian base into the industrial one, simultaneously altering social structures and individual consciousness, and creating a new class and novel class consciousness. The peasant class that dominated in the feudal agrarian system was not declassed and remained at the center of the new system. There is no denying the fact that this hyphenated reworking of the feudal into agriculture-based capitalist one had some traces of modernity and altered at least selected areas of experience and created some space for modern ideas of equality, liberty and fraternity. Moreover, Punjab was the last state to be integrated into the British Empire. Therefore, the people of the region have always nurtured a keen self-pride and longing for self-governance and have been ever ready to showcase their chivalry and valor. Hence, Punjab was always the nerve center of the nationalist movement, offering the denizens of the region a chance to realize the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. The period of pre-independence was also the period of undivided Punjab, the time when the composite culture that has always defined Punjabiyat was a lived experience and marked every area of life. Therefore, the period of nationalist struggle, or the pre-independence period, has been engraved so strongly on the collective consciousness of the people of Punjab.

The marked fascination for the medieval and pre-independence Punjab has been explained with brilliant theoretical insights by Professor Ravinder Singh Ravi. For him, medieval Punjab was marked by an epoch where the contours of ideological struggle were formed in the confluence of literature, religion and politics. For him, the socio-economic base of Punjab was characterized by an Islamic feudal dictatorship. Its superstructure, however, was not merely a passive reflection of that mode of production. It offered a revolutionary understanding of its time and always presented alternative narratives that had people-centered issues at their core. For example, Gurbani and Sikh Movement always tried to counter contemporary power structures and endeavored to establish people-centered discourse by mobilizing the confluence of literature, religion and politics. In the same manner, Suffi poets attempted to raise a social consciousness among the masses, though their religious affiliation was with the ruling class. This social consciousness was, at the level of the superstructure, essentially in opposition to the ideology and value system of the ruling dispensation. Even in the literary form of ballad, a conscious attempt to construct a rebellious streak through the primary human emotion of love can easily be traced. It can, therefore, be inferred that medieval Punjab offered an ideological infrastructure constructed through living cultural practices that could have been instrumental in the historical reconstruction of the socio-economic base. Unfortunately, this potential was never realized and it was left to the British to transform an agrarian feudal society into a modern one. However, the British had very obvious vested interests and never had the intention or the will to play the role of catalyst in the transformation of Punjabi society. The hyphenated transformation of a predominantly feudal society into an agriculture-based capitalistic one by the British did not let the local feudal class acquire the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. Religion that offered a revolutionary alternative in the medieval age was now used as an ideological tool to carve out a distinct ethnic identity by the bourgeoisie of the different communities. This identity was culturally manifested in terms of separate religious values, thereby creating a space for distinct cultural and class identity. To conclude the point, medieval Punjab offers itself as a period of potential wholeness, an epoch that carried the seeds of historical reconfiguration of Punjab that was never converted into reality, hence the fascination for the period in the collective consciousness of the people of Punjab.

In the same manner, the initial years of the 20th century were a watershed in Indian history. On the one hand, there was inhuman exploitation of peasants and the labor class that fostered in them class unity. This class unity was manifested in different struggles that they undertook against the British Empire. On the other hand, by this time, the national bourgeoisie had acquired the confidence to counter the Empire and had the determination to carve out a distinct national existence for itself. Hence, India's struggle for independence was a confluence of all sections of the

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society under the leadership of the bourgeoisie class. This trend was reflected in Punjab as well, and both the working class and the local bourgeoisie participated in the independence movement with great fervor. This multi-class participation ensured that the idiom of the Indian freedom struggle was progressive, inclusive, and at times even revolutionary. However, this struggle against the colonial power was not allowed to reach its logical conclusion in the form of class struggle that would have transformed the local socio-economic structure. In post-colonial India, the local bourgeoisie situated itself at the centre of power and did not let the transformation take roots. Nevertheless, the pre-independence period, like the medieval one, also offered itself as a point that presented a kind of oneness and unity.

As stated above, the grammar of narrative structures and idiom of Punjabi film exhibit a strong impact of a nuanced space, where the values, moral codes and anxieties of the above mentioned periods form a confluence. This sway is so persuasive that the moral universe of even contemporary Punjabi film is defined by the constellation of these codes. The reason is quite obvious. The underlying social-political and economic structures that script the reality surrounding the cultural production named film have been shaped by the same forces. This latent association with medieval and undivided Punjab is manifested in the form of strong popularity of period films in Punjabi cinema. This fascination with these periods has acquired a new significance as contemporary Punjab can be termed as mere 'fallen secondarity' of the Punjab of folklore. From a very grave agricultural crisis to the shifting of industries to the neighboring states, from drug addiction to immigration of youth and capital, and from massive unemployment to ever- increasing communal tension, there is hardly anything that seems worth the pride that has always been associated with Punjab.

The cinematic representation feeding itself on such a bleak scenario will always be a challenge. At the same time, film as such a huge commercial venture, will always find it risky to offer a realistic portrayal of such a harsh reality. Above all, a Punjabi filmmaker will also face psychological and political challenges in representing the contours of harsh socio-economic reality. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, film as a genre has always been defined by its ability to transform the real into dreamlike by mythologizing the content represented. The above-stated reasons offer a plethora of psychological and economic reasons for a Punjabi filmmaker to flee the present and dwell into mythologized past, a point where all the ideological and material struggles are veiled under glittering representation. It is in this past that the Punjabi filmmaker invokes the image of Punjab that is deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of the people of Punjab. This image of Punjab located in the past offers a rich possibility of decoding the anxieties and insecurities faced in the present and the larger structures that govern the psychological makeup of the populace of this area. Thus the concealed ideological and material tensions covered under the gleaming manifestation of the past offer way from the 'said' to the 'unsaid' that ultimately defines everything.

It, therefore, implies that in a Punjabi film, the portrayal of history, along with contemporary incidents, folk narratives and mythology, has been an essential ingredient. According to Surjit Singh, the participation of history in Punjabi film can roughly be of three types. The first is the thematic aspect, which is woven around historical events, circumstances and individuals. The second is the thematic composition of the film, where any form of human experience and human emotions might have been portrayed. Still, its entire structure and texture must be informed by insights acquired through specific historical circumstances. The third way is to create a particular sensibility through the portrayal of a historical personality, or even an entire age. In these films, only those details of the life of the individual are presented, which are thematically central to the film. Still, these details might not be historically important or even authentic. The details foregrounded might also be an extension of popular perceptions and legends associated with the individual. According to Surjit Singh, in such a case, the historical is more active in cinematographical aspects. The visual aesthetics are weaved in a manner that an aura is created around the historical character. The audience is immersed in this aura through different cinematic elements in a way that they no longer care for its historical authenticity (114).

Therefore, a film does not merely represent history. Rather it recreates one, assigning it a specific shape in a particular direction to cater to the sensitivity and sensibility of the viewers. The history recreated is not merely history repeated cinematically. Rather, it is duly informed by the present and the near future. Thus a past is created through the lenses of the present, duly informed by ideological, political and economic imperatives of the present and near future. It can, therefore, be inferred that the image of the past of a populace being constructed in the memory of people through cinema is not innocent. It carries traces of ideological dispositions of the present. It, therefore, follows that to comprehend ideological dimensions of cinematic representation, one needs to deconstruct the dialectics of the past and the present.

If the historical epochs of medieval Punjab and undivided Punjab have indelible marks on the collective consciousness of the people of the region, neo-liberalism has redefined every area of life in contemporary India. From the abdicating of welfare rationale by the state to the rise of the right-wing in politics, from the dominance of the market in economics to social tensions; from agricultural crisis to the

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emergence of the super-rich class in India, the nation has been re-conceived, re-imagined and re-presented. The impact of neoliberal policies has not been identical in all the states of India. Socio-economic and political configurations of state and its position in the federal structure of India are the factors that have been instrumental in defining the contours of the impact of neoliberal policies. At the beginning of the 1990s, when neoliberal policies were unleashed in India, Punjab was at a crucial juncture of history. It had just started to emerge out of the shadow of terrorism, but the wounds inflicted on it had left strong marks. The Green revolution that consolidated economic and social divisions prevailing in Punjabi society nevertheless had produced immense wealth at one point in time. By the decade of the 1990s, it had already exhausted itself as an engine of growth and started exhibiting its ugly sides. The impact of Green Revolution on the environment, health and lifestyle of the people had started posing itself as a grave threat.

The trinity of liberalism, privatization and globalization knocked at the door of Punjab at this historical movement. At the surface level, globalization might have led to a qualitative and quantitative increase in yield and marketing of agriculture. But a society must not be judged by the quality of its material production; rather the quality of ideas produced in that society must work as a parameter in the final judgment. As it is always the case with capitalism, a cocktail of culture, ethnicity and economics was prepared to convert Punjab into a market of consumers of culture. As already mentioned in the beginning, Punjab has always been predominantly an agrarian society with a very strong feudal superstructure. However, resistance and dissidence (sometime in the form of chivalry and valor and at other in the form of opposition to the state and other power structures) have always been associated with the pleasantry of Punjab. Capitalism, in its global avatar, worked out a paradox. At the level of outlook, it foregrounded feudal elements that did not exhibit any commitment to the collective cause. At the level of material consumption, it nurtured a global taste. The dissidence and resistance that could have challenged the state or social evils were transferred to the trope of women, wealth and wine. This tendency caused an escapist outlook; the youth and the peasantry ran away from the socio-economic struggles and started inhabiting the space of simulacra. Hence, there has been great popularity of decorated space of simulacra in popular culture that is ruptured from the lived experience of culture.

Thus the value system of the region was re-defined and re-articulated. Key areas of the value system like education, health and the notion of success were given new definitions. Education was promoted as mere means to material well being in the form of a job in some multinational company promoting the commercialization of education in form of mushroom growth of the private institutions that nurtured so-called employability. Healthcare was no longer the sacred duty of the sate. Education and healthcare were divorced from the question of social and economic justice. Success was defined merely as a synonym to possession of material wealth and luxuries of life. A perception was created that justified the change affected by globalization and represented everything as inevitable. This is how a fetish for money, sex and commodity was created. In such a scenario, it is not merely a coincidence that real issues concerning Punjab have been marginalized in the politics of the state. In all state elections in the new millennium, issues like Punjab's share in river waters, the status of Chandigarh, federal structure of India and the role of states in this structure have been left on the periphery. As a result of this complex process, in the field of cultural production, a brave Punjabi fighting against state oppression, social evils and injustice are projected. In real life, Punjabis have been deserting their motherland and shifting to other countries. The culture industry represents Punjabiyat as a brave nationality, offering itself as an alternative to Hindutva chauvinism. In reality, in Modi's India, Punjab has been left at the periphery of political landscape at the national level. With just 13 seats in the Parliament, it has not been given central importance in Modi's India. With centralized GST and a decline in the state economy, Punjab has been left on the mercy of the center.

The Punjabi film *Radua* (2018), a science-fiction directed by Nav Bajwa and starring Gurpreet Ghuggi and Satinder Satti, is a manifestation of the dialectical relationship between the past and the present. The contours of this relationship, as stated earlier, are shaped by larger socio-economic and political factors. The plot of the film revolves around traveling back in time to the year 1955. It is a story of Nav, an IT expert; Sukhi played by Gurpreet Ghuggi, who is a mechanic; Hem Chand Lambha played by B.N. Sharma, who works as a Lab technician; and Jasmine played by Satinder Satti, who is their landlady. Hem Chand Lambha and Sukhi are facing financial crunch and have not been able to pay their rent. Sukhi has a strained relationship with his wife and is not allowed to meet his son. Nav, on the other hand, earns his living through a machine named radua by him. This machine can intercept phone calls. One day, a phone call from a drug dealer is intercepted by Nav. To help Sukhi with money, the three impersonate as drug dealers and go to crack a deal with drug peddlers. They are caught by the police and released when nothing objectionable is found from them. They assume that someone is recording their calls and Nav tries to repair his machine. In the process, some confusion is created and by accident Hem Chand Lambha throws a chemical on the machine. By chance, Jasmine is also present there and the electric shock

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created by throwing of chemical on the machine converts it into a time machine and they all reach the Punjab of 1955. In their stay in the Punjab of 1955, they safeguard the village against Pakistani aggression by conducting surgical strikes. Somehow they invent the machine to come back to 2018, only to succeed in traveling to 2255.

On the surface level, the plot of the film is full of elements like songs, romance, emotions and comedy. But a contemplated re-look at the plot raises many uneasy questions. First of all, the film travels back to 1955, the era just after independence. Ideally, if one has to travel back in time in a Punjabi film, it would be medieval Punjab or undivided Punjab. Almost all the period films from Punjab travel back to these historical epochs. What is even more intriguing is the fact that the Punjab of 1955 is not introduced through cultural icons or freedom fighters. The characters of the film might have traveled to the Punjab of 1955, but the Punjab of that age is recognized as the Nehruvian India. It is through the Independence Day speech of Nehru that the characters get to know that they have landed in 1955. What is even more problematic is that the very mention of Nehru is countered by a rebuttal in the form of a reference to Modi's India:

"*Sarpanch sahb, eh 2018 e te Narendra Modi desh de pardhan manti ne. Pure pind ch kise nu nahi pata, eh anpada da pind e?"*

"Kehra 2018, kehra Modi?"

"Oh mharaj, jehra pehla andolan karda hunda si, jinhe 500 te 1000 de note band kar te"

("Hon'ble Head of the Panchayat, this is 2018 and Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India. Nobody in this village knows this, is this village of the illiterate?"

"Which 2018 and who is this Modi?"

"My dear, the one who used to organize protests and who demonetized 500 and 2000 banknotes")

All this does not stop here and the characters from 2018 can not help referring to national landmarks:

"Na 62, 65, 71 di koi larai hoyi. Is hisab naal 82 ch jehriya Asian gaima hoyian Pargati maidaan ch, oh vi nahi hoyian, na asi 83 ch world cup jitaya e cricket da"

"Fir ta tuhade hisaab naal kottappa ne bahubali nu nahi marya hona?"

("It means the wars of 62, 65 and 71 have not taken place. By this logic, even the Asian Games of 1982, held in Pargati Maidaan, have not taken place, nor have we won the cricket world cup of 1983.")

"In this case, then, even Kottapa would not have killed Bahubali")

The recognition of the 1950s is not made through a distinct regional, cultural and geographical identity of Punjab, which is hardly the case in the field of cultural production. The war of 1962 and 1965, and the Asian games of 1982, which played a central role in polarizing communal equations in Punjab; and India's victory in the 1983 cricket world cup, are all national landmarks. These might be symptomatic of a very serious melody that hints at the marginalization of Punjab and issues concerning Punjab in the national discourse. This movie can be considered as a watershed as it is perhaps one of the first movies to admit this fact at the level of manifestation. There is one more very intriguing reference that hints at the political unconscious of our time by foregrounding what is generally left unsaid in the realm of cultural production. The very mention to Narendra Modi as someone who used to organize protests is a Freudian slip of the tongue and an admission of guilt. It points to Anna Hazare, whose protests at *Ram Lila Maidaan* discredited the UPA II as corrupt, ineffective and crippled. His protests created a vacuum that was ultimately filled by projecting Modi as an incorruptible, effective and a decisive leader. The fact is that Narendra Modi has never organized a sustained and prolonged protest. The reference to characters of film *Bahubali* (2015) is also full of significance. The film marks the blurring of boundaries between the regional and national cinemas in India as the commercial obligations of huge potential collections in North India deprived this film of a distinctly regional flavor. The focus of *Bahubali* was more on a decorated and stylized representation of fantastic action sequences accomplished through the intervention of a sophisticated technique. The film also marks the highest point of cinematic representation of de-historicized and mythologized past.

The very mention of demonetization serves two purposes. It is an attempt to establish Narendra Modi in history through his trademark move, allegedly undertaken to end the evil of black money and transform the Indian economy into a digital one. Simultaneously, it might be interpreted as an admission of guilt as various studies have shown that the move significantly hampered the growth of the Indian economy and ultimately laid down the foundation of n aeconomic slowdown that is staring at us in 2019.

The most conspicuous part of the film is where the characters from 2018 guide the villagers in conducting surgical strikes on the Pakistani army camp. First of all, the very idea of surgical strikes in 1955 is a historical anomaly as it is a historical fact that the demarcation of the boundary between India and Pakistan and heavy deployment of the army on the border was affected only after the 1965 war. It is also symptomatic of a persistent habit of the incumbent establishment in India, and elsewhere in the world, to make such anomalies. The recurring phenomenon of

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making historical anomalies might be interpreted as an attempt on the part of different establishments to mythologize the past. At a more serious note, it might be an attempt to discredit the credentials of history by replacing serious scrutiny of history with a naïve looking but deliberate endeavor to trivialize history.

The act of conducting surgical strikes is very deeply imbibed in the nuanced relationship between the past and the present and the ideology that scripts that relationship. Surgical strikes, allegedly conducted in 2016 on militant launch pads across the line of control in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, denote a paradigm shift in India's security planning and execution. It marks a culmination of India's slow but steady departure from Nehru's policy of non-aggression. Indian state's blatant propaganda of surgical strikes might be interpreted as an attempt to overtly claim its hegemony in the region that the Indian state has never done so plainly and apparently.

Narendra Modi and RSS's resentment against and aversion to Nehru's idea of India is very well known. For them, Nehru's colossal presence in the post-independence India was the factor that did not let them realize their dream of Hindu India in natural response to the creation of the Islamic state of Pakistan in 1947. Therefore, the very act of conducting surgical strikes in Nehru's India is ideologically overloaded. It is symptomatic of a strong will to rewrite history, not from outside, but from inside by entering into the India of the 1950s, the decade when the idea of India was put into practice by Nehru. Therefore, the historical anomaly of conducting surgical strikes in 1955 is an attempt to re-inscribe the past, an endeavor to correct a historical error, a venture to re-imagine, re-invent and re-define the past to fulfill one's fantasy or accomplish one's project of past.

It is peculiar that this re-programming of the past has been performed through a Punjabi film. This surprise, however, presents a chance to contemplate and scrutinize a lot of equations. Perhaps, it is suggestive of the paradox mentioned earlier in the paper. The cultural representations of Punjab and Punjabiyat are propounded as an alternative to the forces of Hindutva. This movie represents the other side of the paradox as it unveils the complicity between cultural artifact of film and the forces of Hindutva. It also represents the ever-shrinking space for the real issues of Punjab in the imagination of the people of the region and the discourse prevailing at the national level. The film might also be interpreted as symbolic of the waning of regional voices in Modi's India and their desperate attempt to imagine themselves in the ideological contours offered by it.

On the whole, the film offers a rich possibility to unearth the dialectical relationship between the past and the present by helping us reach the unsaid through the said.

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