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Memoirs of a Village: A Theoretical and Methodological Reading of M.N. Srinivas's *The Remembered Village*

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Abstract:

*This paper is an exposition of theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted by M.N. Srinivas in his study *The Remembered Village*. It thus reviews *The Remembered Village* in relation to the adequacies and inadequacies of structural-functionalism and ethnographic field-work practice in social science tradition. In doing so it suggests Marxian and subaltern perspectives as alternative paradigms to understand social reality. Unlike the structural-functional framework, the Marxian and subaltern perspectives allow to reflect on aspects like exploitation and domination of the subordinate groups and conflict of interests as an inherent feature of relationships between dominant and subordinate groups. The omissions of *The Remembered Village* on the account that it adopts a structural-functionalist framework and presents an elitist understanding of social reality however, does not decry its sociological and anthropological relevance.*

Keywords: *Structural-Functionalism, Participant observation, Book-view, Field-view, dominant caste, sanskritisation, Marxian perspective*

1. Introduction

“For me India begins and ends in the village...”¹ The village has for long been viewed as a convenient entry point for understanding traditional Indian society. The ever existing importance of studying village in order to comprehend Indian reality cannot be ignored. For the various anthropologists and sociologists, a village represented India in microcosm — an invaluable observation centre, where one could study ‘real’ India, its social organization and cultural life. M.N. Srinivas, one of the pioneering Indian sociologist² has claimed that by studying a village one could generalize about the social processes and problems found in great many parts of India. The construction of the category of ‘village’ predates back to the colonial past. It was during the British colonial rule through the writings of colonial administrators that that India was constructed as a land of village republics. Thus, Inden (1930) pointed out that “though most other civilizations of the orient too were primarily agrarian economies, it was only the Indian society that was essentialised into a land of villages” (p. 30). However, the colonial perspective represented a village by imparting it with qualities such as autonomy, stagnation and continuity. In short, the colonial writings on village reflected it as self-sufficient, unchanging and static entity.

Notwithstanding its historical origins in the colonial writings, the idea of village has persisted in Indian imagination and has found diverse expression in the writings of Indian nationalists, sociologists and anthropologists. The break or discontinuity between the oriental understanding and colonial perceptions of a village comes most vividly from the ethnographic study *The Remembered Village* conducted by M.N. Srinivas.³

This paper offers a reading of theoretical and methodological perspective underlying *The Remembered Village*. It is a unique study as it is a memory based account of the field-experiences of its author. The processed field-notes on it got fortuitously burnt and it could be published only in 1976 after a prolonged gap when its author first visited the field (Rampura village) in 1948. The paper focuses on the theoretical, methodological and technical underpinnings underlying the study of Rampura village. For a better understanding it is imperative to have a definition of conceptual categories, which have been subsequently worked out in relation to the text. Thus, while the theoretical perspective implies, general theory base or the standpoint of the author, research methodology is a concrete basis or

¹Gandhi 1979b: 45, in a letter to Nehru written on August 2, 1944. Cited from Economic and Political Weekly, Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar p.3343.

² Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, popularly known as M.N. Srinivas would have been 100 this year. This paper focusing on *The Remembered Village*, one of his most significant work critically recounts some of the contribution made by him to the field of Indian sociology.

³The writings of Indian sociologists dispelled the myth of village self-sufficiency and established the village as an ensemble of social relationships and networks, which extended even outside it.

mode through which the author using a certain theoretical base has come upon to understand the object of his inquiry, and research techniques relate to tools used in data collection and analysis.

The paper starts with focusing on the theoretical framework that M.N. Srinivas adopted to study Rampura village. This section spells out the influence of structural-functionalist paradigm⁴ in shaping the M.N. Srinivas's understanding of the village. It then focuses on the research methodology and techniques used by M.N. Srinivas in his study. The next section of the paper is a critical viewing of *The Remembered Village* with respect to the Marxian study of Goran Djurfeldt and Staffan Lindberg, *Behind Poverty: The Social Formation in a Tamil Village*. The conclusion takes an over-view of some of the key issues taken up in the paper. It points out the significance of *The Remembered Village* to the field of sociology and social anthropology despite some of its limitations.

2. The Theoretical Framework

In his study *The Remembered Village*, M.N. Srinivas states that his purpose is to understand social structure and social problems of people living in a village as seen by the villagers themselves. Being a student of both A.R. Radcliffe Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard,⁵ M.N. Srinivas's theoretical perspective and methodological orientation to a great extent got influenced by these luminary figures in the tradition of sociological and anthropological research. In his work on the Rampura village, M.N. Srinivas (1976) has acknowledged "I had been converted during my years of studentship to Radcliffe Brown's brand of functionalism (subsequently) designated structural functionalism in the US...and I was excited about its implication for the field-work: I wanted to examine first hand, events and institutions in all their complex interrelationships" (p. 19).

Thus it is evident that *The Remembered Village* was written under the broad rubric of structural-functionalism. In other words, *The Remembered Village*, highlights in what ways the structural-functional paradigm has influenced M.N. Srinivas's methodological construction of the category of village. It is worth-while here to elaborate briefly on what it means by functionalism or structural-functionalism as it came to be designated later. Deriving from organic analogy, the central premise of functionalism/structural-functionalism is that there is a functional interdependence between different parts of an organic whole, so that the parts can be understood only in relation to the whole, contributing to the maintenance of the whole. Thus, functionalism/structural-functionalism views society as a system that comprises a set of interconnected parts which together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis is society and its various parts are understood primarily in terms of their relationship, to the whole (society). For instance, social institutions like caste, religion and family constitute parts of the social system and should be seen in relation to it rather than being viewed as isolated units. The focus is on the contributions they make to the social system as a whole. The functionalist/structural-functionalist paradigm therefore highlights the importance of different parts (institutions) in making a contribution to keep society functional/operational. The fundamental concern is the maintenance of the equilibrium and stability within the society. Consequently, the functionalist/structural-functionalist paradigm fails to account for any change or transformation in the system, and hence, provides a more or less static understanding of society as it prevails at a given point of time. It will be seen in a later section that M.N. Srinivas's work is not free of some of the shortcomings of functionalism/structural functionalism.

The Remembered Village is a holistic understanding of Rampura village. Thus, as such the study presents no single sociological problem per se as its central concern. M.N. Srinivas has studied Rampura from the point of understanding its social structure. It is a holistic account of a multi-caste village. In the study M.N. Srinivas has stated that he was interested in examining Rampura and his people as he found them in 1948. Hence, he explored several facets of village life — domestic, social, economic, religious and political. The work provides a relational understanding of the lives of people belonging to different castes, classes, religious and lineage groups and shows how different facets of life for example; social, economic and religious come to impinge upon each other and the entire village as a universe gets organized.

A cursory glance at *The Remembered Village* would make one think that it is caste that is its central theme. However, the study does not focus on caste as an independent and isolated unit. The caste is being observed as one of the facets that organizes, the patterns of interaction and relations between villagers. According to M.N. Srinivas, it is various facets of village life (parts) that together constitute the whole — the village. The village is being presented as an integrated whole — it is a reality for Srinivas unlike for Louis Dumont and David F. Pocock⁶ who establish caste instead of village as a significant social reality.

The picture that M.N. Srinivas presents of (Rampura) village is that of it being a harmonious whole, where social relationships are organized and assembled in vertical and horizontal caste ties⁷. The instances of consensus and co-operation demonstrate the functional integrity and interdependence of difference units/aspects of village life. The caste, class and religion etc. are various aspects of village

⁴ The structural-functionalism emerged as a dominant perspective underlying the modus-operandi for conducting sociological and anthropological research in 1950s and 60s. This period broadly coincides with the time period when M.N. Srinivas did his fieldwork of Rampura village in 1948.

⁵ A.R. Radcliffe Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard placed structural-functionalism at the centre stage of social science inquiry. In this respect Radcliffe Brown's works *On Social Structure and Structure and Function in Primitive Society* and Evans-Pritchard study *The Nuer: A Description of the modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of the Nilotic People* is noteworthy.

⁶ Louis Dumont and David F. Pocock are social anthropologists who have extensively written the institution of caste. Louis Dumont's ideas on caste find best expression in his work *The Homo-Hierarchicus*. David F. Pocock's emphasis on caste are well found in his study *Kanbi and Patidar: A Study of Patidar Community of Gujarat*.

⁷ Vertical ties are forged in associations and interactions of two distinct castes (for example, Brahmin and Shudra) holding different positions in social hierarchy. Horizontal ties on the contrary, are an outcome of social intercourse among members of similar caste and sub-divisions/*jatis* within it.

social life that get intertwined for the maintenance of the larger whole i.e. Rampura village. Consequently, M.N. Srinivas's study demonstrates that facts like the *jajmani* ties⁸, ritual division of labour, hierarchical organization of different castes, presence of different religious groups, practice of purity and pollution are not source of schism or conflict in the village. In fact, these are looked upon as crucial by the villagers for the maintenance of village life and more so keenly adhered to by them. The economic and social dependence of Muslims on Hindus and the paternalistic nature of the patron-client relations among various Hindu castes had made Rampura an ideal place for mutual co-operation and peaceful co-existence. In this context M.N. Srinivas (1976) stated "A big patron attracted clients as a magnet attracted iron filings. The poor and weak felt unsafe without a patron. ...when a client was in deep trouble and needed the patron's help, he appealed to the patron's protective impulses by likening him to father. In return for the economic benefits and protection which he received, the client was expected to obey, the patron; his bidding and be loyal..." (p.217-218). Further, even the factions which resonate with not anything other than the idea of dissension and conflicting tendencies in the Rampura village have been highlighted in a structural-functional framework. M.N. Srinivas points out that the village Rampura is not free of factional disputes and internal divisions. However, his emphasis is on portraying factions as a "vertical group" that brings together individuals in different economic categories and from different castes. Factions according to him were certainly a manifestation of egalitarianism but they forged strong bonds between unequal partners and provided yet another countervailing force to horizontal ties of caste and class. What is central to M.N. Srinivas's understanding of factions in his study of Rampura village is that during inter-village disputes villagers despite, belonging to different units united together representing the village as a unity and a basis of identity.

M.N. Srinivas's structural functionalist moorings again get reiterated as he presents Rampura as a part of larger civilization, having links with the wider-community. In the study Srinivas dispels the notion of village being an isolated and closed community, questioning the colonial construction and understanding of it. He sees Rampura as microcosm of larger macrocosm. Rampura is shown to represent significant elements/aspects of the Indian civilization, which draw people to it, even from outside. The mutual dependency and exchange is evident in relationships which the villagers forged with the outsiders. The study makes reference to itinerant traders, shepherds and entertainers visiting the village on a regular basis. Annual festivals and fairs, people's visit to pilgrimages, inter-village disputes highlight village to be anything distinct from a closed unit. Thus M.N. Srinivas (1976) stated "The better of villagers went to *ayurvedic* doctors in Hogur, who had good reputation or to allopath in Mysore" (p. 78). All this establishes this affirms the fact that the Indian village has never been an isolated unit and has always been connected, however, tenuously with neighboring villages and towns in a variety of ways. Hence, it seems that a field worker has to follow "...his people to the other villages with which they have contact, to the *tehsil*⁹ and district headquarters and even the state capital. Network analysis is likely to prove indispensable for analyzing the nature of relationship which a village has with neighboring villages and town" (Srinivas 1987: 196).

In *The Remembered Village* M.N. Srinivas is not indicating village as being prone to any transformation and change of radical order. His study reflects village as an idyllic and harmonious entity. It constructs the village as a traditional social structure, constituted by ensemble of social relations, which express mutual dependency of the villagers.

3.The Research Methodology and Technique

The Remembered Village is an outcome of ethnographic field-work method in the form of participant observation conducted by M.N. Srinivas in the village of Rampura in Mysore district of state of Karnataka in southern India. It is a field-view account of Rampura, offering a descriptive understanding of the village through its micro-level analysis, bringing to fore and reflecting on the particularities and specificities of the village life. The importance of using the method of field-work to have an empirical and objective/scientific understanding of the object of inquiry (Rampura village) was sown in Srinivas's mind by Radcliffe Brown in 1945-46. MN Srinivas (1930) wrote in his study "...he (Radcliffe Brown) talked to me about the scientific importance of making a field-study of a multi-caste community in India" (p. 1). The field-work for the study was undertaken in 1948 and was spread over a period of 11 months (Cross 2013). It entailed M.N. Srinivas taking residence in Rampura amidst the villagers. In addition, M.N. Srinivas made several visits of varying length to the village until 1964 (ibid.).

This study represents an advance over the social science tradition rooted in book-view accounts of Indian social realities, which derive their understanding from the ancient Hindu scriptures and texts and provide a universal framework overlooking variations and differences. It moves far beyond the book-view accounts on caste as these fundamentally focus on *varna* model. These accounts establish supremacy of a ritual hierarchy with Brahmins at the top followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. However, *The Remembered Village* indicates the dominance of Okkaliga Peasants, in addition to that of the Lingayat Brahmins in the village, thereby implicitly throwing light on the concept of dominant caste¹⁰. The text focuses on caste in everyday practice as fluid and

⁸ *Jajmani* ties relate vertical ties formulated between patron-client. They show economic solidarity between the upper-caste, patron and lower-caste/Kamin, client. The patron is dependent on the services of client. In turn the client is obligated to be loyal to the patron who reciprocates by rewarding for his loyalty by paying him in cash or kind.

⁹ *Tehsil* is an administrative unit in India at the block level. A block may consist of several villages and a few towns.

¹⁰ M.N. Srinivas put forth the concept of dominant caste in Sociology. This concept questions the book-view understanding of caste, which give primacy to ritually based hierarchy seen in the all India *varna* model. A caste may become dominant on the basis of any such criteria as possession of sizeable arable land, numerical preponderance, wields political power, high status in ritual hierarchy etc. M.N. Srinivas's views on the concept of dominant caste are explicitly spelt out in his works *The Social Structure of Mysore Village and Dominant Caste and Other Essays*.

dynamic phenomenon, though circumscribed and defined. In the text we also witness instances of *sanskritisation*, whereby the lower castes imitate the practices of the upper/dominant castes to improve their social standing.

M.N. Srinivas's observational approach involved direct observation, genealogical and census surveys, in-depth unstructured interviews and informal discussions as various techniques to gather data on Rampura village and its social structure. The idea of participant observation entailed his going to the village and settling amidst the villagers for a considerable period so as to gather data on them. As an ethnographer he tried to maintain informal ties with the villagers by participating actively in their day to day conversations and gossips to forge a bond with them in order to procure information on the village social life. In addition, he relied on secondary sources like land records and varied other forms of government and administrative documents to gain familiarity with the village.

Srinivas highlights certain dilemmas in carrying out a field-research using participant observation as a mode of data collection. He pointed out that during his stay in Rampura the villagers imposed on him an identity — a persona, of being a Brahmin and thereby, he was constrained to act within the categorization that was endowed to him — lest his aim to study the village might have got jeopardized. In fact, owing to this perhaps one of the most striking misnomer in *The Remembered Village* is an inadequate attention being given to Harijans and Muslims by the author. Thus, M.N. Srinivas has acknowledged in the text that “his ...was a high caste view of village society. I stayed in a high area, and my friends and companions were all peasants or Lingayats. However, I did know a few Muslims and Harijans, and one or two potters, smiths and traders but none of them as intimately as I knew my peasant and Lingayat friends” (p. 198). This implies that “the manner in which an individual anthropologist (or sociologist) negotiates his relationship with the village is determined by who is going to be his informant” (Jodhka 2000:15). Since the easiest way of developing rapport with the village is through the village leaders or head of the *panchayat* who invariably came from the dominant upper caste, an anthropologist (or sociologist) has to come to terms with the village social structure and normative patterns of relationship and interactions (ibid.). Further, for most anthropologists and sociologists it is easier to approach village through leaders and headman as they themselves belonged to upper or middle class background (ibid.). The high caste and landed family status of M.N. Srinivas made it easy for him to cultivate a lasting relationship with the two dominant men in Rampura- the village headman and Nadu Gowda (head of the largest lineage in the village). Friendship with these three dominant figures in the village played a crucial role in facilitating his entry into village and shaping the context of his study.

However, it is worthwhile to note that despite observation was the basic technique in conducting the study of Rampura village, it was ultimately M.N. Srinivas's memory and reflection that went into the shaping and formulation of the text- *The Remembered Village*. Henceforth, the discrepancies that the work may seem to represent could be to a certain extent accorded to inadequacies of memory account.

4. A Critique: Marxian Perspective

The preceding sections highlight certain aspects of *The Remembered Village* which opens it to a critique and makes its validity questionable, especially for those belonging to the Marxist and Subaltern tradition.¹¹ The Marxist and Subaltern perspectives present a conflict ridden picture of social reality. Their central preoccupation lies in reflecting that there is a conflict of interests between the dominant and subordinate groups along with the exploitation of the latter by the former. They thus portray society as fragmented and far from being a harmonious entity.

M.N. Srinivas in *The Remembered Village* presents a too idyllic a picture of the village. He provides an elite or *brahminic* understanding of village life coming through functionalist/ structural-functional framework, whereby no room is left for expressing grievances against the exploitation which the lower castes and Harijans suffer at the behest of the upper-castes. In fact, M.N. Srinivas acknowledges that his text does not include an in-depth understanding of various categories like the Harijans and Muslims. Thus, the caste as it comes to portray a singular group as the dominant group commits serious exclusions by not taking into account adequately, the histories of other communities and cultures which are equally important units and contribute to village life. Thus the “realistic picture” of a village that the text claims to provide is far from being realistic and rather may be regarded to convey a distorted account of the same. Thus taking a cue from the Marxist and subaltern perspectives, it may be stated that *The Remembered Village* is reflective of a dominant Hindu ideology.

Further, in *The Remembered Village*, the village is portrayed as a harmonious unit with co-operation being the mainstay of patron-client ties. The village is symbolic of egalitarian values. Such, a view seems too utopian if one were to look at Goran Djurfeldt and Staffan Lindberg's study *Behind Poverty: The Social Formation in a Tamil Village*. This study focuses on a village in South India in Thaiyur *panchayat*.¹² Djurfeldt and Lindberg provide a Marxian analysis of underdevelopment of a village. They have studied the village in terms of base and superstructure; whereby base is representative of the economic structure and class relations within the village which are highly exploitative and in egalitarian, and the superstructure is the ideological base and comprises caste relations. Djurfeldt and Lindberg have pointed out that the superstructure gets articulated with the base and leads to the reproduction of the dominant ideology (that of the upper-caste Vellala or a rich Pariyar). Caste emancipation at the behest of various developmental schemes and programs launched in this area seem to be a myth or a false hope. As here even among the lower castes, economic or class divisions may be observed, with the economically better of members of lower groups amassing and siphoning all the benefits of developmental programs, further reinforcing and heightening the existing inequalities. In such a scenario, Djurfeldt and Lindberg state

¹¹ The Marxian perspective has its roots in the writings of Karl Marx, while B.R. Ambedkar is one of the leading exponent of the Subaltern perspective.

¹² Panchayat is an organisation for local self-governance at the village level in India. It is a five member elected body.

that all development and extension programs have failed in the region, because of the extreme poverty and deprivation of the underdog as a result of which they are unable to draw benefits from them. Moreover, the failure of these programs is also owing to factors like bureaucratic corruption, whereby the programs get formulated in terms of serving interests of the bureaucratic elite as well as those belonging to high economic and caste status. Contrary, to the afforested view, M.N. Srinivas's text though indicates caste-class divisions within the village, it fails to take into account the inequalities and deprivations of many at the hand of a few, and nexus or alliances formed between bureaucratic elites and dominant groups against the weaker sections or groups. Moreover, the text enshrouds the exploitation underlying the patron-client relationships, and portrays the patron as someone having paternalistic and benevolent attitude towards his client. Likewise, it depicts the client exhibiting trust and loyalty to the patron.

Further, the views portrayed in *The Remembered Village* may be contested if one were to examine the text in the wake of Subaltern ideology or understanding as provided by Dr. Ambedkar. Thus, M.N. Srinivas's account about the ideological unity of the Hindu society (village) claim that ideologically the untouchables also subscribe to the ideas of pollution and purity stand challenged when seen from the view-point of Ambedkar. Ambedkar was against the idea of cultural consensus and reciprocity as characteristics of caste system and viewed it rather as a significant weapon to exploit the weak and underdogs in the society. He in fact, drew an analogy between caste and class and looked at caste exactly in terms in which, Marx had talked about classes.

5. Conclusion

The Remembered Village is a thorough expression of M.N. Srinivas's structural-functionalist framework and ethnographic field-work method. This was in consistency with the general environment of research and praxis in sociology when the field-work for the study was being under-taken from 1948 until 1964. In social sciences the 1950s and 60s marked a shift from concerns regarding origin and development of society laid explicitly in terms of biological evolutionism to a theoretical framework of structural-functionalists', which focused on society in relation to issues of stability and order. M.N. Srinivas's study is a clear reflection of this intellectual environment. In fact, he took his training as a sociologist at Oxford under some of the leading exponents of structural-functionalism and ethnographic field-work practice as mentioned in the paper earlier.

Also, a social scientist is not unmoved by his social milieu and environment in which he is living, rather his works are a reflection of the same, and his aspirations and expectations regarding its idle state. M.N. Srinivas's concern for focusing on the organization of the village and reflecting it as an ensemble of relations that are mutually interdependent thus, seem to be in consistency with the national scenario at the time when he first visited the field in 1948 to do fieldwork for the study. India had just gained independence from the British rule in 1947 and was settling from the after-math of post partition upheaval and political turmoil. A study of village life and its description as a stable and harmonious entity seemed fruitful.

The significance of *The Remembered Village* emerges from the fact that not only it provides a vivid description of village, but the contributions it makes to our understanding of caste as one of the significant aspects that organizes village social structure. The study marked an advance over works as that of Dumont's and Pocock (1970, 1957) which see caste independently, without focusing on the social context. It questions the book-view perceptions of caste, which are based on ancient scriptures that establish the supremacy of the *varna* model/ritual hierarchy. The book-view understandings make caste appear as dogma inflexible, rigid and unchangeable. In doing so it points towards caste as a part of everyday reality, lived through the experiences of individuals and groups. Hinting towards dominance of Okkaliga peasant castes and focusing on concepts like *sanskritisation*, the study renders some flexibility to the concept of caste. In doing so it reflects the efficacy and superiority of ethnographic field-work in social science tradition vis-à-vis the scriptural (book-view) analysis of the social reality.

While the study establishes the suitability of field-work, it exposes us to some of the dilemmas of field-worker in conducting research. This brings to fore a question: Can there be a value-free sociology and anthropology? The manner in which a social scientist enters the field is likely to influence his research. His social identity and past affiliations and associations may become a significant basis for his gaining entry and acceptance into the field, which may have severe implications on his research. In Rampura M.N. Srinivas's positioning in the field was such that it did not allow him to move beyond focusing on dominant groups in the village. The study overlooks the perspective of Harijans and Muslims.

M.N. Srinivas's positioning in the field may thus be held responsible for his elitist perception of village life in *The Remembered Village*, which the study is often accused off. However, this may be only a partial explanation for the accusation to which *The Remembered Village* is often put. M.N. Srinivas's theoretical mooring in structural-functionalism further explains why the study is blamed to represent a dominant view of village society. Unlike, the Marxian studies as that by Djurdfeldt and Lindberg *The Remembered Village* presents a too idyllic picture of village social structure. The inequality in social relations is depicted but there is an overall consensus. A consensus in social relations in Rampura village reflects that *The Remembered Village* is ahistoric study i.e., it is "impervious to change" (Cross 2013). However, between 1940s and 1964 there are various developments that Rampura witnesses. "During this time the village is electrified, it gets a middle school, and new bus services connect it to urban centres" (ibid.). The study but overlooks these developments and how these "transform or reproduce material and symbolic relationships between castes" (ibid.). Nonetheless, the importance of *The Remembered Village* in shaping and framing sociology and social anthropology of India cannot be overlooked. Focusing on various facets of village life this study not only rendered an exhaustive understanding of it, but in doing so moved beyond the textual traditions reinforcing the significance of ethnographic field practice. Further, reflecting on villagers' connections with the wider community the study marked a break from the colonial writings on village as these viewed it as an isolated and self-contained unit. Also, the study is noteworthy in that it provides a perspective on sociological concepts like the caste dominance, and *sanskritisation*.

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