



FUTURE OF BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONSHIP-A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Bangladesh-India relations were at their highest level during the period of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (during Awami League government from 1972-1974). Since then, these relations have been fluctuating for reasons like changes of governments and the political scenarios in Bangladesh as well as the non-cooperative attitude of India towards Bangladesh. However, relationships between both the countries have improved in the last 10 years (during the two regimes of Awami League government between 1996-2001 and 2009- 2015) as both the Prime Ministers have visited each other's countries with the views to strengthen these relationships. Long outstanding issues like land enclaves, maritime boundaries and border demarcations have been resolved during this period through the constructive efforts by both sides. This paper critically analyzes the future relations between Bangladesh and India by examining the challenges and opportunities that will determine the course of the relationships between the two countries. It examines the past and present Bangladesh-India relationships and recommends appropriate steps to fix the unsettled issues like trade imbalance, water sharing discords of Farakka and Teesta Barrages, transit and transshipment issues for the improvement of the relationships of both the countries for the future mutual benefits. This paper will keep its scope within major unresolved issues for both the countries. For maintaining continuous congenial relations, Bangladesh acknowledged India's role for its active military support during the Liberation War of 1971 through "signing a treaty of friendship, peace and co-operation with India in March 19, 1972". With the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975, Bangladesh-India relations deteriorated and expressed into open disputes

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and mistrust due to political changes in the two countries. Thus, the contentious issues like trade imbalance, transit and transshipment issues, water sharing discords of Farakka and Teesta Barrages, demarcation of maritime boundary and border disputes remained unresolved. But, Bangladesh-India relations have improved when Bangladesh Awami League (AL) led by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina elected in 1996. But “whole gamut of relationships of the two countries has considerably worsened when Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was elected in 2001”. However, these relations have significantly elevated with a newer dimension when Sheikh Hasina took over the power in 2009. Geography is a hard reality that Bangladesh is surrounded on the three sides by India (shown on the map below). It is argued that India as a regional super power will have dominant over Bangladesh that might affect security, economic and other issues of Bangladesh. Again, transit through Bangladesh links the North Eastern Region (NER) of India with its mainland. Both India and Bangladesh had the opportunities and challenges in the past for resolving all the disputes but they failed to materialize it. As such, maintenance of good relations has potential significance for the overall development of both the countries. Opportunities and challenges once again emanated for both the countries to fix all the outstanding issues for the better future relations. As such, both the countries must avail and exploit all the available challenges and opportunities through multi-faceted mutually beneficial cooperative efforts for the socio-economic development and friendly future relations. Recently Settled Issues and Its impacts Land enclaves and border demarcations were the long outstanding issues since 1941. India got possession of 111 enclaves and East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) got 51 enclaves. “The enclave’s issues were areas that belong to Bangladesh but were inhabited by Indian citizens and areas belong to India but inhabited by Bangladeshi citizens”. As such, the general people in and around these enclaves of both the countries have been suffering. Bangladesh and India signed the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) on May 16, 1974 gave guidelines for an amicable solution of these problems. However, its implementation was not carried out because India had been foot dragging on the ratification of the agreement.⁴ However, during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in June 2015, Bangladesh and India signed the historic 44 years old land border agreement by exchanging 152 enclaves. Under this agreement, “50,000 deprived citizens of the two countries will reside in their own countries”. Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood described the agreement as a ‘historic milestone in the relationships’ between the two neighboring countries while Modi termed the significant of LBA with the ‘fall of the Berlin

Wall'. In addition, Bangladesh has also settled its long outstanding maritime boundary disputes during this period with its neighbors India and Myanmar. "Bangladesh got 19,467 square kilometers out of 25,602 square kilometers disputed areas in the Bay of Bengal". With the peaceful settlement of these long outstanding issues, Modi government could earn the Dhaka's trust and support. Most of the Bangladeshi has changed their negative attitude and mind set up towards India. They started considering India as a friendly neighbour. This understanding and good faith will enable and establish the future positive ties between the two neighbours which is a strategic achievement for Bangladesh and India. Challenges and Opportunities for Bangladesh and India Strategic achievement by fixing land enclaves, maritime boundaries and border demarcations issues indicate the future positive relations for both Bangladesh and India. To maintain pleasant and friendly relations in future, both the countries have also certain challenges and opportunities to resolve the other major issues. Bangladesh has challenges like balancing trade deficit and resolving water sharing discords of Farakka and Teesta Barrages while India has challenges like transit to North Easter Region (NER) through Bangladesh from Indian main land, establishing security at those regions and controlling China's close ties with Bangladesh and other regional countries. "Access to Bangladesh seaports is of great economic and strategic advantages to India". Transporting goods to its northeast states through Bangladesh, India will significantly reduce time and cost. This will also benefit the Indian Armed Forces solving security issues in those regions. More so, Modi government will face a greater strategic challenge as Chinese influence has rapidly increased in Bangladesh. Mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh is critical if India is to better economically integrate its north-eastern states with the mainland. "Such a relationship could also help India realizing its decades-old 'Look East' policy towards Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)". On the other hand, Bangladesh can attract Indian people and export more items to India. Moreover, resolving the water issues will allow Bangladesh to avoid floods during monsoon seasons and droughts during dry seasons. The future Bangladesh-India relations will depend on the friendly and congenial attitude of India to resolve the major unsettled issues whatever the political position may be, their attitude must be. Political leaders of the two countries have to exploit the available opportunities through the positive momentum for resolving the critical outstanding issues. Trade Imbalance and Ways to Resolve Trade deficit is a long outstanding challenge for India and Bangladesh to fix it. Bangladesh with more than 150 million populations and 4096 km long boundary with India is a vast market for Indian goods. Indian

markets have also demand for many Bangladeshi products. “Both India and Bangladesh have realized that trade imbalance was not in the interest of either partner”. Since 1972, both governments have made a number of trade agreements to lower the trade imbalance. Basing on the "Treaty of friendship, co-operation and peace", both countries signed their first one year trade agreement on 28 March 1972. By March 1973, “India's exports to Bangladesh were \$18.5 million and imports from Bangladesh were \$14 million”. For making trade an effective one, India and Bangladesh signed the Balance Trade and Payment Agreement (BTPA) on 05 July 1973 for a period of three years. “This agreement also could not reach the desired level of trade and showed US\$ 8.18 million imbalance at the end of the first year”. Then, with the change of government in 1975; both countries were no longer viewed as a close friend to each other. They started maintaining distance relations to each other. With a view to resolve the issue of trade imbalance, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established but SAARC failed because India-Pakistan could not fix their continued security issues. More so, Bangladesh government maintained good military and economic ties with China and Pakistan. Thus, trade relations between Bangladesh and India suffered significantly. Despite high trade deficit, the Indian Government imposed a lot of restrictions in terms of tariffs and other barriers on Bangladesh goods entering into its market. “An average tariffs duty for consumer goods in Bangladesh was 23% while the same was 30-55% in India”. Thus, Bangladeshi goods exported to India faced difficulty in competing with local goods. It is estimated that “Bangladesh’s exports to India were worth \$ 512.5 million and India’s exports to Bangladesh were worth \$ 4586.8 million in FY 2010-2011”. “Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh stood at \$ 6.6 billion in 2013-14 with India's exports at \$ 6.1 billion and imports from Bangladesh at \$ 462 million, representing more than double the value of \$ 2.7 billion five years ago. Considering the situation, India financed \$ 1.0 billion line of credit to Bangladesh primarily to upgrade its road and rail connectivity to India. The then Indian President Pranab Mukherjee declared that 200 million out of 1.0 billion would be converted into grants. It is argued that shipment between Chittagong and Kolkata with the smaller vessels is cost effective for Bangladeshi traders. Trading through ocean is more profitable than that of the land customs checkpoints. The trade imbalance can be reduced if trade volume along the ocean is increased significantly. As such, maritime cooperation connectivity project like Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has recently been established. This maritime connectivity will facilitate India and Bangladesh exploiting seaports

of Myanmar and Thailand to the east and Sri Lanka to the west for their economic development. More so, it does not create same types of the political problems that are created by land base trade because maritime trade is not visible to the general public. Therefore, it is less subject to political criticism. For reducing the trade gap, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2011 during his visit to Bangladesh declared zero duty access of 46 Bangladeshi textile items in India. Bangladesh businessmen saw it as an encouraging development to narrow the trade gap. "Trading by Bangladesh directly with the NER may reduce the considerable trade imbalance between the two countries". Bangladesh must explore Indian markets growing awareness about its products and counter its internal political instability to attract more investors. "The two countries recently amended their trade agreement that will allow Bangladesh to conduct trade with the third countries like Nepal and Bhutan by using India's land, water and rail route and vice versa".²⁰ This may also reduce the trade imbalance with India. Recent friendly and cooperative political relations between the two countries indicate that India-Bangladesh will have better relations in future. Water Sharing Disputes and Its Ways to Resolve Attention for resolving the water disputes for Farakka and Teesta Barrages like the trade imbalance is expected. Bangladesh shares 54 common rivers with India particularly the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Teesta (GBT). Changes of the GBT flow from the upper riparian India have significantly impacted on the lower riparian Bangladesh. India has been diverting water from the Ganges since 1975 by constructing a barrage at Farakka. It has also been diverting water from the Teesta by constructing a barrage at Gazoldoba in India. Since then, it has been adversely affecting Bangladesh by depriving its water which has caused a dispute on water issues between the two countries. Farakka Issues Water dispute along the Farakka was realized by Bangladesh when India started its operations in 1975. Bangladesh and India established a Joint River Commission (JRC) in 1972 for sharing of Ganges water in the field of flood control, river basin development and irrigation. "An initial agreement was signed for diverting 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs of water for a period of 41 days from April 21 to May 31". Violating the agreement, India continued withdrawing water even after May 31. It is also argued that the Farakka Barrage was commissioned for operation without arriving at a mutual solution and thus, become a major bone of contentions between the two countries. The relations between Bangladesh and India continued to deteriorate as the bilateral talks showed no progress and assassination of Sheikh Mujib created shockwaves in Delhi. Despite sincere effort of Bangladesh, India continued to divert water from the Ganges. In August 1988, floods

devastated Bangladesh submerging almost two thirds of the country. “The relations between the two countries were swept away with accusations and counter accusations on the causes of floods”. Meanwhile, major political changes took place both in India and Bangladesh (Awami League came to power in Bangladesh while the United Front Government took office in India). It created a new momentum in bilateral relations and the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty was signed on December 12, 1996. According to the agreement, Bangladesh would get 35,000 cusecs and the rest would go to India if flow is 75,000 cusecs or more while each country would receive 35,000 cusecs in alternate 10-day periods between March 11 and May 10. However, India did not maintain it as per agreement. It is argued that flow of water during critical period has put India in a favorable position. India should solve the issue with due consideration sharing equal amount of water as per the requirement by both the countries.

Teesta Barrage Disputes Constructing a barrage across the river at Gazoldoba, India started withdrawing water from Teesta and the “water flow in the dry season (November to May) has declined to 2000 cusecs from 5,000 cusecs. On February 28, 2005 Bangladesh received only 1,400 cusecs of water. As such, the Teesta Barrage irrigation project of Bangladesh suffered significantly. The issue has been raised by Bangladesh in many JRC meetings in the past but it did not work well. Bangladeshi experts proposed for keeping 20 to 30 percent of Teesta water reserved in the lean period to keep the river healthy and sharing the rest equally. But India proposed for keeping 10 to 12 percent reserved and sharing the rest as per the size of the river's catchment area. In 2013, both countries agreed to come to an agreement to facilitate Bangladesh with the Teesta Water. Prime Minister of both countries also met at Dhaka but Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal did not agree to it. It is speculated that she was angry because central government of India did not consult her regarding the Teesta water issue before it was agreed with Bangladesh. She even did not accompany the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh. As such, the agreement could not be materialized. However, with the change of Indian Government in 2015, the Prime Ministers of both countries again met in Dhaka and agreed to settle the issue. This time, Mamata agreed to Central Government of India to share rational water sharing agreement accompanying the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh. This has washed away the mistrust of Bangladeshi towards India.

Transit and Transshipment Issue Transit and transshipment issue is a crucial necessity for India sustaining socioeconomic and socio-political reason for its North Eastern Region (NER). Since 1947, “NER made its business with the main land of India or outside

world through East Pakistan (now Bangladesh)". Pakistan suspended this route for India after the Indo-Pak War in 1965 and thus, NER was isolated from the mainland India. Presently, NER make their trades with the Indian mainland through only hilly and rugged narrow 'Siliguri Land Corridor'. The Indian government has sought transit through Bangladesh for improved economic growth "exchanging Indian products to NER and mineral resources and industrial raw materials to Indian industries". For Bangladesh, it has diverse implications like security, political and economic dimensions. Many argued that it should not be agreed unless some core bilateral issues like trade deficit, water sharing discords of Farakka and Teesta Barrages are resolved. Some viewed the transit as an economic issue and it should not be politicized. Distance from Agartola to Kolkata Sea Port is more than 1400 km whereas it is only 100 km to Chittagong Seaport in Bangladesh. Thus, transport costs from NER for trading to any part of Indian mainland are very expensive. "The shipment of Assam tea to Europe is required to travel 1400 km to reach Kolkata Port through the 'Chicken neck'. 30 India needs the transit through Bangladesh for its transportation of goods not only for the cost also for the security reason. Transit issue must be viewed and treated as an integrated one with other bilateral issues with India. While analyzing cost-benefits, many experts opined that Bangladesh should go ahead but initially the connectivity should be through railway network. Business community argued that transit poses serious involvement to economic, political and sub-regional development strategies and these need to be dealt holistically. On negotiation point of view, it was opined that tariff issue needs meticulous thought and consensus. General perception was that transit and transshipment should not be confined to India rather should extend the initiative up to China, Myanmar and must connect the sub-region. The security issue plays an important role while discussing transit and connectivity issue. Keeping in view the benefits, it seems the above mentioned risks are small from economic perspective. The NER have high potentialities of mineral reserve, natural resources and raw materials. Transit would provide easy, quick and relatively cheaper opportunity for further exploration and use of these resources. Both Bangladesh and India will have economic benefits through the bilateral agreement of transit and transshipment. India will have the access to use Chittagong Port to export its tea and other products from NER to outside country. It will also exchange its goods from mainland India to NER and mineral resource to Indian mainland from NER. In short, NER will be the prime beneficiary of this whole process. More number of investors will be encouraged to invest in NER after re-opening its route through Bangladesh. Thereby, India can increase its overall

economic growth rate and control political instability in those regions. ADB Country Director Hua Du suggests that Bangladesh can benefit through opening up transit and great opportunities for crossing from east to west. “The estimated transit fees will range from \$ 64.2 million to \$ 598.2 million”. Transit will also connect Chinese province of Yunan with Seven Sisters (NER) of India, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh. These countries have the world's largest potential for hydropower. Bangladesh can be a major buyer of electricity that could mitigate perennial shortage. Bangladesh and India positions on unresolved issues Cooperation between the two countries is a continuous process. The relationships of mistrust and hostility between India and Bangladesh cost both countries billions of dollars in missed opportunities. Transit and transshipment facilities would save for India potentially billions of dollars in transportation costs while it would generate substantial revenues and employment for Bangladesh every year. It is argued that greater cross-border investments could produce significant benefits for both countries. The economic growth and development of both Bangladesh and Indian North East can benefit immensely through the development and expansion of trade and economic cooperation between the two geographically contiguous parts of the sub-continent. Thus, the issue of developing economic cooperation between Bangladesh and Indian North East has become an important issue in determining the future of Bangladesh-India relations. Bangladesh can provide a whole range of consumer products to the North East at competitive prices taking advantage of its geographical proximity and can also serve as a good market for products from the North East. Modi inherited a solid base of strong Bangladesh-India partnership from the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Indian thinking was dominated by the security-centric approach instead of seeking to build a long-term state-state relationship. Reluctance to address issues like the Land boundary Agreement (LBA), sharing of waters of common rivers of the Ganges and Teesta and trade deficit showed that India did not view Bangladesh as an equal partner. It is arguable that India’s troubled relationships with the neighbours were a result of its own hegemonic posture. However, this perception with political leaders has been changing gradually in the last few years. Manmohan Singh, during his visit to Bangladesh seeks to build a new future relation with Bangladesh. He also added that the time has come to plan a new path and pursue a bold vision for good relations based on mutual respect and benefits. However, three years have passed but India has not made any remarkable change to the Singh’s statement. If India fails to address the disputed issues properly, relation with China will weaken India’s regional super power. India’s relations with Bangladesh will restrict

its sea connectivity and expansion of 'East Look' policy. It is opined that Bangladeshi and Indian political leaders both in power or opposition must consider their options carefully. Present political situation both in India and Bangladesh must allow both sides an opportunity to rethink and re-envision the relationship. As cultural relations, Indira Gandhi Cultural Center of Indian Council was inaugurated at Dhaka on March 11, 2010. Again, the AL Government, on March 27, 2012 "conferred the Liberation War Honor to 45 Indian friends and institutions for their contribution to the 1971 Liberation War". All these speak about the generosity and priority placed by Bangladesh to India. India must modify its attitude and be more cooperative to Bangladesh to settle all the unresolved issues. Bangladesh must also assist India to make the new beginning. Both countries must compromise their political issues and value the national interests. "Sheikh Hasina government has shown considerable courage and conviction to free its soil from anti-India activity". Bangladesh hopes for suitable reciprocal gestures from India to strengthen the polity. Bangladesh-India relationships started improving significantly with the visit of the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 and the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011. These visits have shifted the perceptions of relations between the two countries. However, these relationships between the two countries have been amplified with the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in June 2015. Types of solutions require integrating Bangladesh and India Both Bangladesh and India have great opportunities to resolve all the outstanding issues. India as a regional super power needs to take initiative and Bangladesh requires cooperating with India for fixing outstanding issues. Both the countries have to think for the economic ties instead of valuing the domestic politics. Central political objectives must supersede the regional or the state objectives for continuing and establishing the future relations. "The Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh has made the normalization of relations with India a priority". Now, India must also show due respect to it and work together with Bangladesh for building strong economic ties in the region. India must resolve the major issues like trade imbalance, Teesta and Farakka water discords. On the other hand, Bangladesh must allow transit and transshipment to Indian North East Regions. Failing to avail these opportunities will bring negative results for both Bangladesh and India. This loss will be greater for India than that of Bangladesh because China will not miss this chance to build up economic and military ties with Bangladesh. More so, Bangladesh is the strategic position for India to tie its South East policies. To build future relations with Myanmar, India needs to avail this

opportunity to extend its maritime bilateral relation. India, because of its domestic politics, has already missed the genuine opportunity to resolve the Teesta River Waters Issues. In turn, this stalled the negotiation for opening up Bangladesh to transit trade from the Indian northeast. Dhaka has been making proposals to Beijing for increased trade connections and investments. “This undermines Indian’s game play for keeping China out of the South Asian region”. Bangladesh and India needs to work closely together for mutual benefits. Increased contacts among the people of both the countries could lead to greater understanding and interdependence. Political stability in both countries would be of prime interest for the economic progress leading to further areas of cooperation. Bangladesh’s location is a strategic position between mainland India and North-eastern states of India. Each of these states has shorter route to the sea through Bangladesh. Bangladesh provides easy land access to the Southeast Asian countries that are important for India’s Look East Policy. Chittagong seaport may be marked as an alternative in this case. On the other hand, India as a huge resourceful country is capable to serve as a big economic zone. Its strategic location linking West, South and East Asian countries makes itself an important point for the whole of the world. It has a big market for which the multinational corporations are conscious and they are competing to capture this large market. Good neighbourly relations with India and Bangladesh will influence the other members also to improve upon the relationship and enhance regional cooperation. The free trade agreement if materialized will improve upon the economy of the region. Recommendations Bangladesh’s relations with India that helped morally, materially and physically during the Liberation War of 1971 have not yet taken a matured shape because of some fundamental differences of perception. The main problem of perception is the mistrust and suspicion among the political leaders of Bangladesh and India over the period of last 44 years. To improve upon the situation, all the misunderstandings are to be removed and gaps are to be covered. Both sides need to come forward with open mind, have free and frank discussions and try to find out the ways and means to eradicate the differences and solve the bilateral disputes for the interest of the common people of both the countries. First Recommendation: India as the regional power needs to make an effort to share the Ganges and Teesta water with Bangladesh as per agreement signed between the two countries. This will ensure proper water distribution and remove the mistrust and suspicion created among the people of both the countries. Second recommendation: Bangladesh requires initiating the case to permit India to use Bangladesh to trade its goods from mainland India to NER and exchange

raw material and other resources to and from NER to mainland India. This will allow India to improve its overall economic growth and control political stability in those regions while it will allow Bangladesh to increase its revenue and employment. Third recommendation: In the globalization era, Indian perception of using own products and restriction of importing Bangladesh goods to its market needs modification. On the other hand, Bangladesh must improve its quality commodities to attract Indian people. This will allow competitiveness market for both India and Bangladesh. Fourth recommendation: Maritime cooperation project through BIMSTEC should be implemented for maritime connectivity. This will permit both Bangladesh and India to expand their economic ties transporting goods through sea. More so, maritime trade not create same types of the political problems that are created by land base trade because it is not visible to the general public.

Conclusion

Critically analyze the future relations between Bangladesh and India by examining the challenges and opportunities will determine the course of the relationships between the two countries. Future relations between Bangladesh and India will depend on how India will resolve outstanding issues with Bangladesh. Narendra Modi has expressed his desire to maintain strong and stable relations with Bangladesh on the themes of economic cooperation and joint interests. The Bangladesh and Indian prime Ministers' visits have great significance because the leadership could develop the trust and confidence. To be fair, the expectation of a historic breakthrough could not fully materialize but Bangladesh is optimistic that India will reciprocate the vision and boldness by signing the Teesta treaty. Bangladesh's perception and approach for India has varied over time under different governments. India could maintain good and favourable relations during the periods of Awami League government while other governments have considered India as a threat to Bangladesh's security and independence. BNP and other military governments maintained distance relations with India but friendly and congenial military and economic ties with China and Pakistan. The quality of 16 relationships between Bangladesh and India has varied greatly depending on the respective governments in power. Bangladesh-India relationships started improving significantly with the visit of the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in January 2010 and the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in September 2011. These visits have shifted the perceptions of relations between the two countries. However, these relationships between the two countries have been amplified with the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh

in June 2015. India must modify its attitude and be more cooperative to Bangladesh to settle all the unresolved issues otherwise China will not miss the chance to tie economic with Bangladesh. Bangladesh must also assist India to make new beginning. Both countries must compromise their political issues and value the national interest. Sheikh Hasina government has shown considerable courage and conviction to free its soil from antiIndia activity. Bangladesh hopes for suitable reciprocal gestures to strengthen the polity. Progress on many of the disputes was stalled from 1975 to 1996 because political leaders of both the countries considered each other as competitor. However, it started improving their bilateral relations from 1996-2001 and significant change took place from 2009 till date. For a prosperous South Asia, both Bangladesh and India must continue to develop peaceful, cooperative and institutional means of solving disputes while integrating into the regional economy. The interests of both the countries dictate that no matter what combination of ruling coalitions are in power, Bangladesh and India have great incentives to continue the forward progress they have made.

End Notes

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