

Chautari Foundation Lecture 2018

(ALMOST) EVERYTHING I LEARNED ABOUT NEPALI LITERATURE IS WRONG

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I've been rethinking my sense of Nepali literature, and am pleased to have a chance to share my thoughts at Martin Chautari, an organization that I played a very small role in founding back in the 1990s, when it was an informal discussion group among “development” workers.¹ Most of us, at the time, were foreign-educated, or actual foreigners. We were well meaning, but we were seeking an intellectual life without any links to Nepal's own intellectual traditions in the political parties, the universities, the writers and activists. It was particularly under Pratyoush Onta's leadership that Martin Chautari developed these links and became a site where foreign-educated Nepalis, foreigners, and Nepal's own intellectual traditions could meet for open debate.

Knowledge-generation is a collective enterprise. It is not an endeavor a person undertakes in isolation. I've written and spoken before on the thoughts I'll share here, first in the introduction (Thapa 2017a) to *La.Lit, A Literary Magazine* Volume 8 (Special issue: Translations from the Margins), which I edited (Thapa 2017b), and then at two talks for the Himalayan Studies Conference at the University of Colorado, in Boulder, in September 2017, and for the Nepal Studies Initiative at the University of Washington, in Seattle, in April 2018. This lecture is a crystallizing of those thoughts, which are still in formation.

One caveat: I am not a scholar, but a writer; I am engaged in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the “wild practice” (2012: 394). I have

¹ This fourth Chautari Foundation Lecture organized by Martin Chautari was delivered in Kathmandu on December 27, 2018. For further details about this Lecture series, see www.martinchautari.org.np/index.php/2012-08-27-08-45-41/chautari-foundation-lecture

put together this lecture from direct observation, and it may lack a proper theoretical framework. I am looking for the answers to the questions I've encountered as a writer, and am very open to learning from those with insight into the subject.

I'll start by discussing some observations I made while translating the work of the Darjeeling-based writer Indra Bahadur Rai. Many of you will know Indra Bahadur Rai's novel *Āja Ramitā Cha* (Rai 2068 v.s.) as an iconic work of Nepali-language literature. It is reputed to be extremely difficult to read. (It isn't; please don't be afraid to read it. Only the first two or three pages are dense.) Perhaps you were assigned it as part of a college curriculum as a student of Nepali literature. Written in 1958, it is set in post-Independence Darjeeling, as the two political movements that shaped its fate—the Naxalite-inspired labor union movement in the tea plantations, and the coalescing of a “Gorkha” identity and the desire for a separate “Gorkhaland”—begin to rise.

As I translated it into English as *There's a Carnival Today* (Rai 2017a), I found it fascinating to observe how the Nepali language functions in India. Worldwide, Nepali is spoken by around 24 million people, the vast majority of whom live, of course, in Nepal and India and Bhutan. In Bhutan it is the language of the Lhotsampa minority, many of whom were expelled in the 1990's. It is a lingua franca there, but it has little power in the state structure.

In India, Nepali is spoken by about 3 million people, mainly in the Northeast—especially in West Bengal—but also elsewhere. As in Bhutan, Nepali is the mother tongue of some and the lingua franca of many more in India. The language came to be one of India's twenty-two official languages due to the efforts of Nepali-speaking cultural figures from Darjeeling, such as Indra Bahadur Rai and Ganeshlal Subba, who led a movement that, in 1960, obliged the West Bengal government to allow Nepali to be used as an official language in the hill regions of Darjeeling District. Later, from 1978 to 1979, Indra Bahadur Rai chaired the Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Bhasa Samiti (All-India Nepali Language Committee), which is the body that ultimately succeeded, in 1992, in obtaining constitutional recognition for Nepali, making it one of India's official languages. Before all of this, there was a generation of writers, including “Su Dha Pa,” or Suryabikram Gyawali, Dharanidhar Koirala, and Parasmani Pradhan, who generated enough Nepali-language literature to give rise to a common imaginary and common identity

based around the language (Onta 1996). Interestingly, Nepali was not the mother tongue for most of its speakers in India. Kumar Pradhan has pointed out in the preface to his *A History of Nepali Literature*: “While the writers of Nepal hail especially from the upper castes and Newars...most of the Nepali writers of India belong to Mongoloid groups who originally spoke various Tibeto-Burman dialects but adopted Nepali as their first language in the course of time” (1984: no page number). Pradhan’s statement is somewhat reductive. Nevertheless, it is true that the language took hold in India. A heroic amount of work went into giving the Nepali language the prestige of being an official language—a status that it enjoys in that country today.

Yet, despite this prestige, Nepali is quite powerless in India. Indra Bahadur Rai was known to his peers in India’s literary world: he was the first Nepali-language writer to win (in 1976) the Sahitya Akademi Award for a book of literary criticism on Nepali literature first published in 1974, *Nepali Upanyāskā Ādhārharū* (Rai 2050 v.s.).² Rai also served as a member of the Akademi’s Executive Committee, as well as the convener of the Advisory Board for Nepali, from 1978 to 1988. Like the Nepali language itself, he had earned prestige in the national arena. But he was not widely read, because he was not translated widely. Before my translation of his novel in 2017, and Prawin Adhikari’s translation of his stories in *Long Night of Storm* (Rai 2017b) in the same year, only a few of Indra Bahadur Rai’s stories had been translated into English or other languages.³ The Indian reader who might know the work of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi didn’t know of Indra Bahadur Rai’s work. My greatest satisfaction in translating him was to introduce his work to an Indian readership, so that they can see the sophistication of the literature from the Nepali-speaking communities of their own country.

The powerlessness of the Nepali language in India, for me, was eye-opening as I translated this novel, because this is not at all the situation in Nepal, where Nepali is the language of state power, and of hegemony. Nepali was declared Nepal’s sole official language in 1956, and over the

² He later returned this medal in protest.

³ Mainly, his work could be read in English only in a 2009 collection of stories edited by Prem Poddar and Anmole Prasad, *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation*.

next three decades, the Panchayat regime of absolute monarchy deployed it as an instrument of national unification and cultural assimilation over a heterogeneous, multilingual populace. The literary canon that was created during the Panchayat regime still defines what people think about when they think about “Nepali literature.”

My discovery of this literary canon came late in my life. English became my first language because my family lived in Canada when I was learning to speak. We returned to Nepal in 1972, and I studied in St. Mary’s School in Lalitpur from KG to class 6. I was a product of the Panchayat’s *Nayā Śikṣā Yojanā*, or New Education Plan, which enforced Nepali as the language of education in 1971. At St. Mary’s, Nepali was the single most difficult subject. I was not good at it, especially not at grammar. What fluency I had, I lost in my teens, after my family moved to the US. When I returned to Nepal ten years later, after college, I could no longer read or write Nepali. It was only after I began to write seriously in my late twenties that I decided to regain the language so that I could read Nepali literature. I re-learned grammar from the poet Manjul, who also introduced me to the art of translation. And then I set out in search of Nepal’s literature.

During this time, I turned to the few English-language resources that were available to gain a sense of the Nepali literary canon. Mainly, these resources came down to two books by the same author/translator: Michael Hutt’s *Himalayan Voices*, which came out in South Asia in 1993 (Hutt 1993[1991]), and his *Modern Literary Nepali: An Introductory Reader*, which came out in South Asia in 1999 (Hutt 1999). I also picked up a smattering of magazine or journal essays in English—whatever I could find, which was not much. I don’t know if they’d even be available any more. They’re lost in the ephemera—as much scholarship is in Nepal.

I owe Michael Hutt a great debt to orienting me to Nepali literature. His books accurately reflect the canon of modern Nepali literature as it is still taught. In poetry, this canon includes the work of Lekhnath Paudyal, Balkrishna Sama, Laxmiprasad Devkota, Siddhicharan Shrestha, Kedarman Vyathit, Gopalprasad Rimal, Mohan Koirala, Bairagi Kainla, Parijat, Bhupi Sherchan, and Banira Giri, and some younger poets. In prose, he includes Guruprasad Mainali, BP Koirala, Bhavani Bhikchu, Shivakumar Rai, Daulat Bikram Bista, Bijay Malla, Ramesh Vikal, Shankar Lamichhane, Indra Bahadur Rai, Poshan Pande, Tarini Prasad Koirala, Prema Shah, Parshu Pradhan, Dhruva Chandra Gautam, Manu Brajaki, and Kishore Pahadi. Even

a few years later, a list such as this might have included more women: Toya Gurung, for example, or Manju Kanchuli, Benju Sharma, and Sita Pandey. But this list was put together by 1990. It followed logically from what I had been taught back in St. Mary's, too: that these were the writers who had followed in the footsteps of Nepal's "first poet," Bhanubhakta Acharya.

I began to read their writing in Nepali dutifully (if slowly: I have not read all of their books yet). I also began to read the work of contemporary writers—my elders and peers. Naturally, everything I read was in the Nepali language. Now and then, I would encounter some work that had been translated from another language—mainly Nepal Bhasa—to either Nepali or English. This was how I came across the work of Durgalal Shrestha, Purna Vaidya and Buddha Sayami.

There was such a distance between my own English-language literary world and the Nepali-language literary world and the literary world of Nepal Bhasa—the indigenous language of my hometown, Kathmandu—that it took me several years to even learn about the language rights movement that the Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala had spearheaded from the late 1970s onward. I had no inkling of the ways in which Nepal Bhasa writing had been suppressed during the Panchayat era. I believe it was through the essays of Kamal P Malla that I learned that languages other than Nepali had been systematically sidelined through government policy after 1960. Or perhaps I learned about this after meeting Malla K Sundar at a talk he gave here at Martin Chautari. Later, he showed me Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala's base in Chhetrapati and very patiently explained to me how the language rights movement, which had traditionally been strongest in Kathmandu, was now expanding throughout Nepal. There was, by this time, a growing demand for education in the other national languages. The government had even formed a National Language Policy Recommendation Commission in 1993 under the leadership of poet Bairagi Kainla (whose official name is Til Bikram Nembang) to respond to these demands.⁴ I learned about this, and realized that there were writers in Nepal's other languages too, but this did not shake the foundations of my beliefs about what constituted Nepali literature.

Mea culpa. The failing was perhaps personal. It was my own lack of questioning—perhaps a trait I learned under the New Education Plan. But perhaps my misunderstanding was a larger, more common one, shaped by

⁴ See Nembang *et al.* (1994) for the Commission's report.

knowledge-generation that took place during the Panchayat era. So blinkered were we all that we could not grasp this most fundamental truth: “Nepali literature” is not the same as “Nepal’s literature.”

In the Nepali language as in English, we use the adjective “Nepali” carelessly, to mean anything of Nepal. But this also risks conflating it with the Nepali language, which has only recently been called this, rather than the Khas language. I have only now, around twenty years into my own literary journey as a writer from Nepal, begun to use the term “*Nepalko sāhitya*,” or “Nepal’s literature”—a term which allows us to uncouple the adjective “Nepali” from the language “Nepali.” Nepal’s literature is a much vaster body of work than Nepali literature.

Having started off with this fundamental misunderstanding—mistaking Nepali literature for Nepal’s literature—I assumed for many years that Nepali was the language of Nepal’s literary imagination. But as I kept reading and translating Nepali literature, I began to notice how narrow this word was.

The narrowness came even from the style, to begin with. In the Nepali language, there is a big difference in the diction, grammar, and sentence structure of the informal vernacular style in which people talk and of the formal style in which they write. (This is not the case in English, where the spoken and written languages are much closer stylistically.) To read Nepali literature, I had to learn formal Nepali. I had to learn “proper Nepali”—which is to say, the language of Nepal’s Chhetris and Bahuns, as codified over the Panchayat era and promoted through the schools, and through cultural institutions such as the Royal Nepal Academy.

I noticed right from the start that “proper,” or formal, Nepali does not have a wide expressive range. I kept pointing out to other writers such as Manjul and others, that when characters in a novel spoke, they used very formal Nepali, in a way that made them sound entirely unnatural. Writers such as Manjul wrote in a more informal, spoken style—which the generation after them has adopted. But among the older generation of writers, there was a tendency to use formal Nepali even when the words were coming out of the mouth of a peasant.

It struck me that this was not a language that everyone can grasp, given the low literacy rate to begin with. Literature was beyond the reach of ordinary Nepalis. And their readership was tiny. The print run of literary

books was very low—500 to 1000. Yet there seemed to be enough prestige in the literary world to compensate for this—it never seemed to bother the writers I met. Or perhaps they didn’t know what to do about it, engaged, as they were, in only the creative aspects of writing. The issue of “book culture” and publishing, sales, and marketing, were out of their frame of reference.

As my engagement with Nepali literature deepened, I noticed that other than a few “regional” writers, most writers were centered in Kathmandu, as were their stories. It was also hard to miss the glaring fact that most writers were Bahun or Chhetri and based in Kathmandu; and the overwhelming number of writers were men. The invisibility of women, Dalits, *Janajātis*, and writers from outside of Kathmandu—the exclusivity of Nepali literature—puzzled me at first, and then began to needle me.

I had to conclude that, in its approximately hundred-year-old history, modern Nepali literature had not really found space for all of Nepal. I wrote as much in the introduction (Thapa 2001) to *Secret Places: New Writing from Nepal*, a special edition of the literary magazine *Manoa* that Samrat Upadhyay and I co-edited with Frank Stewart in 2001, containing Nepali literature in translation. In the introduction was my first big realization about Nepali literature: that it was not at all inclusive.

My next big realization about Nepali literature came only after I became more educated about Nepal’s gathering civil rights movement. I had always stood in favor of Nepal’s “diversity,” but had not known of the history of the civil rights movement in Nepal. I got this education, unexpectedly enough, through the World Bank, when the anthropologist Lynn Bennet asked me to join a team of other researchers to write a report on a variety of rights movements: the women’s rights movement, the Dalit rights movement, the *Janajāti*/Indigenous rights movement, and the Madhesi rights movement, as part of a global drive the World Bank was on to come up with a “Gender and Social Exclusion Index.” This was the study that brought the term “social inclusion” into the very center of public discourse in Nepal, through the world of international aid. The study focused on Nepal’s varied civil rights movements, which started around the 1950’s but had only come into their own after the return of democracy in 1990. The World Bank needed English-language writers who could work independently; and that was how I fit into the study. This was in 2004. I co-researched the women’s rights movement

with Seira Tamang, and I also co-researched the Dalit rights movement with Dharma Swarnakar. Our research wasn't book-based; it involved meeting many of the leaders of these movements, be they based in political parties (who had started many of these movements as early as the 1940's and 1950's) or in INGOs and NGOs or CBOs or other cultural organizations. The goal was to "map" these movements comprehensively.

Political events—King Gyanendra's February 2005 coup and the beginning of the peace process in 2006—disrupted the work. The World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) published a summary report in 2006 as *Unequal Citizens*. But then the paradigm of the aid world changed with the peace process. The focus on social inclusion—which had made this report possible—fell out of favor with Kathmandu's political establishment as the first Constituent Assembly got to work after 2008. "Fell out of favor" is putting it mildly. There was in fact a targeted backlash against the civil rights movement in the establishment, who saw the social inclusion agenda as "divisive" to national unity. The language of the establishment began to mirror the logic of the Panchayat era: that unity was important, that Nepal could "disintegrate" if diverse communities pressed too aggressively for their rights. The study came under attack. And this is how I learned that the history of intellectual suppression in Nepal wasn't past at all. The World Bank never published the final report.⁵ Its full findings were, in effect, suppressed from the public domain.

For me, the knowledge I gained during this work proved transformative. Learning about the history of the civil rights movement shook the foundations of all of my beliefs about Nepal. It was as though my eyes were finally open and I was seeing Nepal without Panchayat-era blinders on. The governing class of the Panchayat era—comprised overwhelmingly of Chhetri and Bahun (who now call themselves Khas-Arya) *men*—consisted of less than 15 percent of the population. This was also the governing class of the post-1990 era. (And it is still the governing class today.) This small group, for which there is no acronym—"Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males" (CHHEM) was what Mahendra Lawoti (2005) came up with—had traditionally asserted their power, in part, through language: in the government, in the media, and, though literature is supposed to empathize with the powerless, in the literary

⁵ A copy of the unpublished but professionally copy-edited final report, dated June 2005, is available at the Martin Chautari Library in Kathmandu under the title "Citizens with(out) Rights: Nepal Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment."

imagination as well. If the world of Nepali literature was exclusionary, this was because the Nepali language was used to make it so. I came to see that the Nepali language was the language of hegemony in Nepal.

Throughout this period I was translating Nepali literature into English, both because I had decided that this was my way of being of some service to Nepali writers, and because the technical aspects of translation strengthened my own writing. (I would recommend translating to all English-language writers who are bilingual.) I had started off by translating Ramesh Vikal's short stories in an anthology titled *A Leaf in a Begging Bowl* in 2000 (Vikal 2000).

After that, I started a column in *Nepali Times* called Nepaliterature, in which I would introduce and translate a story or poem. In 2009, I put together these translations in *The Country is Yours*, an anthology of the work of forty-nine Nepali poets and writers (Thapa 2009). In the reading I was doing, and in editing this collection, I deliberately chose the work of as many women writers as possible, and of writers such as Sanat Regmi or Sarubhakta who were from communities outside Kathmandu, to redress the exclusivity of Nepali literature. I was not entirely successful. The book includes seventeen women and thirty-three men. It consists of several Nepal Bhasa poems and one Maithili and one Tamang poem each; but otherwise, all of the work in it was originally written in the Nepali language. It included a few writers from Pokhara and the Madhes, but mainly consisted of writers from Kathmandu. Nevertheless, the book does give a more inclusive look at Nepali literature than most Nepali-language anthologies; but what it taught me, above all, was that expanding out of "Nepali literature" to find "Nepal's literature" was a daunting task, and possibly entirely beyond me.

After all, I can only understand one of Nepal's languages: Nepali.

Now, one of the direct results of the civil rights movement was Nepal's change of policy from acknowledging only one national language to 123. This took place in the 2011 census. By this time, the poet Bairagi Kainla had become the Chancellor of the Nepal Academy and Nepal's multilingual reality had been amply highlighted by the *Janajāti* and civil rights movements. One could say this was a high point of the by then decades-long language rights movement. The 2011 census put the percentage of the population for whom the Nepali language is the mother tongue at 44.6.

So how can a literary translator—or, more fundamentally, a reader of literature—who knows only one language even know what Nepal’s literature consists of? Because here is what an inclusive canon of Nepal’s literature would look like:

After the Nepali language, Nepal’s largest languages of the Indo-European family are: Maithili (12% of the population), Bhojpuri (7%), Tharu (6%), Bajjika (3%), Doteli (3%), and Awadhi (2%). There are also languages of the Tibeto-Burmese family, the largest of which are Tamang (5% of the population), Nepal Bhasa (4%), and Magar (3%).

An inclusive canon of Nepal’s literature would contain work that is originally written in Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang, Nepal Bhasa, Magar, Bajjika, Doteli and Awadhi—if it is to include only the ten largest languages of Nepal. It should also include Hindi writing, as Hindi is the lingua franca of the entire southern belt of the Tarai-Madhes. It should also include some work from the remaining 12 percent of Nepal’s population, who speak more than hundred languages, including some that lack scripts, and some that are on the verge of extinction.

What we think of when we think of “Nepali literature” looks nothing like this: while there is a vernacular stream of literature, the mainstream of Nepali literature remains stubbornly exclusive.

I came to this realization when I tried to edit “Translations from the Margins,” a special issue of *La.Lit, A Literary Magazine* (Thapa 2017b). The *La.Lit* team of writers, translators, and editors all collaborated in trying to come up with the most inclusive issue possible. And the final result is more inclusive than most Nepali-language collections. It contains twenty-two women to twenty-nine men (including both writers and translators). It also contains work directly translated from original works of Nepal Bhasa and Maithili, thanks to a few translators who could move (with varying levels of ease or difficulty) directly between these languages and English. There is a Wambule Rai story translated from the Nepali translation. The collection gives a very good sense of just how dynamic and rich Nepal’s literature is. But it still does not adequately represent Nepal in its diversity.

For me, the experience was humbling, because it made me realize that (almost) everything I had learned about “Nepali literature” was wrong, because the foundation of that knowledge has been faulty. It also made me realize that I did not have the capacity to correct my own misunderstanding

of what, in fact, constitutes Nepal's literature. It is easy to identify a mistake. It is much harder to correct it.

A task as large and ambitious as the restructuring of a national canon must be a collaborative effort, preferably with the leadership of the state. One longs, of course, for another Bairagi Kainla to take up this kind of work from an institution as centrally placed as the Nepal Academy. But right now, since the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution drafted by the second Constituent Assembly (2013–2015), we've seen a backlash against the civil rights movement and the resurrection of old national myths—placing Chhetri and Bahun culture and language back at the center of the state in a nostalgic impulse, or in an inability to reimagine Nepal outside the Panchayat-era framework and envision it as a just and inclusive democracy, where its diversity is not a threat, but an asset.

I believe, however, that the civil rights movement will overcome this temporary setback and regroup and continue on. The demographics are on its side, as is the ongoing search for the soul of democracy in Nepal. The hostility to civil rights is already softening a few years into the drafting of the new constitution. Inclusion will return as a goal for the social and political transformation of Nepal.

Meanwhile, there is work that non-state actors can do to restructure Nepal's literary canon. Right now there is a lot of knowledge scattered about between language-rights groups, activists, writers, and scholars in Nepal and abroad. There is quite a lot of knowledge about Nepal's diverse literatures being generated at the local, national and international levels. What Nepal lacks is a way to collate this knowledge. But the knowledge is being generated. And it is only going to increase. This gives me a lot of hope.

Perhaps a non-state actor can even start to put together a baseline study or conduct a "mapping exercise" of the situation and history of the literature of Nepal's languages, to generate public knowledge about whether they exist in oral or written form, or in traditional or modern genres. Possibly, this could be a collaboration. Instead of just one or two language-rights groups like the Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala, there could be language-rights groups from all of the national languages, who generate and share knowledge of the situation and literary history of their language. (Again, this work would obviously benefit if it were to take place at the Nepal Academy.) There is

already a translation unit in the Nepal Academy. Through it or private means, translation needs to expand massively, to launch a project of translating between Nepal's other national languages and the Nepali language, so that we can all read what each other is writing. And of course diverse publishing and book marketing is required.

I'm seeing that something like a twenty-year project would be required to really restructure the national literary canon. One day the literature we read—and the stories we hear—will no longer overwhelmingly be by Chhetri or Bahun men, with a few “other” voices mixed in. The stories we hear will reflect Nepal in its diversity. Nepal's literature will finally look like Nepal.

I want to end with two points.

First a note on the Nepali language, which I love, in case anyone thinks I've been too harsh towards it by framing it as the language of hegemony in Nepal. When I've talked on this subject before, I've sometimes been greeted with responses to the line of: Nepali language, too, needs protecting, especially from other more dominant languages, such as English.

Yes, of course. I am not saying that the Nepali language is not rich or worthy or worth protecting. But I would like to point out that it is not a small, but a middling language globally. Especially if it hopes to remain the lingua franca of Nepal, it should be treated as a robust, living entity, and challenged and made demands of and asked to grow and evolve and rejuvenate itself, as more and more writers are now doing. This is what will keep the Nepali language, itself, alive.

The second point I'd like to make, and the point I'd like to end on, is a point I started this lecture with: how collective the nature of knowledge-generation is in Nepal. As I was putting together this talk, I thought back to how important it was for the Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala to have done the work it did, and to share its work with the larger literary world of Nepal. I thought about how important it was for “mainstream” writers to encounter the language rights movement, and the civil rights movement, and to feel the discomfort and perhaps even the insecurity that they felt when asked to share the stage more. These have been difficult and at times very painful conversations. I have been privy to many arguments among writers as they work through their views on the narrowness and exclusivity of Nepali literature. If they have slowly broadened their understanding—as I have—it

is because of the painstaking intellectual work that so many writers and civil rights activists have put in.

It is no longer tenable to conflate Nepali literature with Nepal's literature because they put in the effort to educate us all. We all become more informed and intelligent through debate and open dialogue. Thank you to Martin Chautari for having exposed me, personally, to so much questioning on Nepal, and for helping to educate me. Let's keep talking through moments of discomfort, anger, and pain. Let's put our heads together on how to reframe Nepal's literary canon.

Thank you.

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