

## **EDUCATION IN THE MOTHER TONGUE: THE CASE OF NEPĀLBHĀSĀ (NEWARI)**

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Nepālbhāṣā (Newari) is a rich and highly developed language with a vast literature both in ancient and in modern times (see Malla 1984, 1982 and 1978). Numerous literary organisations exist in different towns and villages of the Kathmandu valley and outside the valley. To top it all, a Nepālbhāṣā Academy was established in 1992 in Kathmandu. The Newars have also been in the forefront of the campaign for education in the mother tongue, long before the new constitution of 1990 granted that right. That itself is not a matter of great surprise, because Newari, once the state language of Nepal had been suppressed since Rāṇā reign (1847-1951).

When HMG planned to make Sanskrit an obligatory school subject in 1992, the outburst was predictable. After more than a century of neglect and suppression of Nepal's living languages, including Newari, HMG decided to promote a classical language instead.

The protests and demonstrations against Sanskrit soon turned into a struggle for education in the mother tongues of Nepal. The government's only gesture towards Nepal's other languages had been in the morning radio news: 10 minutes news in Hindi and 5 minutes news in Newari (however, in 1994 it started to broadcast news in a few more languages of Nepal: Maithilī, Rāī, Tāmāṅg, Limbu, Gurung, Thāru, Abadhī, Bhojpurī, etc). The campaign against Sanskrit thus took a turn; it became a movement against the imposition of Nepali (khas) as National Language. Nepālī had become the target (Van den Hoek 1992:2) and education in the mother tongues, foremost Newari, but also Tāmāṅg, Gurung, Rāī, Limbu, Magar, and other languages, had become the political demand of the day. Speakers in the open theater drew large crowds.

### **Nepālbhāṣā (Newari) Past and Present**

Newari is an aboriginal language of Nepal. The present-day Kathmandu Valley, which was once known as Nepal itself, was the place where Nepālbhāṣā, that is, the Newari language, originated. Siegfried Lienhard observes it in the following sentences:

"The term Nevārī, which is too common in western philology and linguistics, has never been current in Nepal. Even today Nevārī-speakers call their language Nepālbhāṣā, i. e., language of Nepal. Indeed, before the final conquest of Kathmandu by Prithivi Nārāyaṇa in A. D. 1768, Nevārī was the state language in the whole of the valley, which, by many of its inhabitants was considered as being Nepal in the true sense of the words."  
(1992:3)

The written use of the Newari language began in the early Malla period (1200-1482 A.D.). However, the earliest evidence of Newari is found in a palmleaf of Pāṭan Ukū Bāhāl dated 1114 A.D. (Malla 1990). The next one is an epigraph of Sankhu Vajrayoginī dated 1172 A.D. which was believed to be the first before the Pāṭan palmleaf was found (Tulādhār 1990:120).

Newari became the language of literature only in the second half of the fourteenth century. Haraṃekhalā (1374), Nāradaśmṛti (1380), Amarkośa (1381) were translated in to Newari during this period. The oldest known chronicle of Nepal, the Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī, was compiled in Sanskrit and Newari in the 1380s (Vajrācārya and Malla 1985). The earliest dated poem in classical Newari goes back to A.D. 1573, the earliest extant drama to A.D. 1673, the earliest narrative text go back to 1374 A.D. (Malla 1989:446-7). Only in the two hundreds years of the later Malla period Newari was recognised by the court (Shrestha 1990:19). After the conquest of the Gorkhālī King Prithivi Nārāyaṇa Śāh in 1768, the Newari language had to undergo vicissitudes. At the beginning of the Śāh time it could retain its prestige and importance. Kings like Ranabahādur Śāh and Rājendra Vikram Śāh still functioned as patrons of the Newari language and themselves wrote Newari literature, but gradually Gorkhālī, the mother tongue of the new rulers, succeeded in displacing Newari (Lienhard 1992). Especially with the rise of Rāṇā Prime Minister Chandra Śumser Newari was banned from the court (Malla 1978:5). His successor Juddha Śamser turned more bitter towards the Newari language. "Anyone daring to use Newari either for business or literary purposes was found guilty of committing an illegal, even a revolutionary act" (Lienhard; Ibid:4). A considerable number of writers were given admonitions and fines, sent to prison or forced into exile.

But the suppression of the Rāṇā reign somehow turned out fruitful to Newari. Legends of the Newari renaissance like Siddhidās Amātya, Niṣṭhānanda Vajrācārya, Yogvir Singh, Jagat Sundar Malla, martyr Śukrarāj Śāstrī, Dharmāditya Dharmācārya all were products of that period. Jagat Sundar Malla (1882-1952) was the first person advocate the need to use the mother tongue in education (see Adams: 1992:11).

With the change of politics in 1951, the language policy of HMG became liberal, but not for long. Just before the fall of the Rānā reign in 1951 'Democracy Nepāl Radio' was established against the Rānā reign and started broadcasting news in Nepālī, Newari and Hindī. Later it was renamed 'Radio Nepal' as a government medium and in April 1965 it stopped broadcasting Newari news and programmes.

Likewise, in the educational field, the Nepāl Rāstriya Vidyāpīṭha was established in Birgunj in 1951, and Newari was recognised as an alternative medium in education. The Nepal Education Council adopted Newari as an optional subject. HMG also recognised Newari as a spoken language subject and oriental language subject in 1953. (In Nepal, about 40 to 45 minutes of teaching in a day are given to a particular subject. Seven to nine subjects are taught in a school; usually each subject carries 100 full marks in the yearly examination.) Newari was never recognised as a medium of instruction in education; on the contrary, Nepālī was made the only medium of instruction in schools to the detriment of all other languages of Nepal (Shrestha 1987: Ka-kha; Gellner 1986:120). This discriminative measure in education made it impossible for other languages including Newari to compete with Nepālī.

In 1971, the introduction of a New Education Policy pushed Newari further back to an optional subject by forcing children to make a choice between Newari or other languages, science, vocational subjects, mathematics and so forth. This policy meant the final suppression of the education of the Newari language and literature at the school level.

In higher education, the only University of Nepal, Tribhuvan University, accepted Newari as a subject and as part of the spoken language (vernacular) subject (Nepālī, Hindī, Maithilī and Newari) from 1959. But in 1971 vernacular subjects were removed from the curriculum of the University and Newari remained only as an optional subject to be chosen among several other subjects. Like in the schools Newari is not supposed to be the medium of instruction. In 1977, Newari was introduced at the Master's Degree level and a Ph. D. Degree was also made possible. Moreover, a degree in Newari from the university is not highly valued since it does not give access to employment in administrative posts of HMG and is not counted in promotion.

The Royal Academy of Nepal never recognised any prominent literary figures in Newari language. It published no books written in Newari. Also the government owned Sājhā Publication, which was originally called Gorkhā Bhāṣā Prakāśana Samiti (Gorkhā Language Publication Committee) but later renamed Nepālī Bhāṣā Prakāśana Samiti (Nepali Language Publication Committee) and in 1965 converted into Sājhā Prakāśana (Co-operative Publication), never published any text books or literature in Newari

while it continued to publish textbooks and readers as well as literary texts in Nepālī. The curriculum development centre of Tribhuvan University and the Educational Materials production centre are producing Nepālī text books for higher education and schools, but they never published books in any of the other languages of Nepal (Malla 1989:459).

Like Radio Nepal, Nepal Television is also reserved for Nepālī. It is giving regular programmes in Hindi, Urdu and English, but one of the native languages of Nepal rarely receives a chance in those electronic media.

From the time of Rāṇā repression till today Newars have been trying to revive their language. In this period, several literary organisations appeared, and numerous books were published by cultural societies and by individual efforts of Newar people. In 1979 with the establishment of Nepālhbhāṣā Maṃkāḥ Khalah, the Newar elite could manage to combine the language movement in a forum, whose chairman is a prominent politician of Nepal, Mr. Padma Ratna Tulādhara. Beside several literary magazines and journals, two weeklies and two dailies are regularly published in Newari nowadays.

In the latest central Bureau of statistics 1991 census the Newar population amounts to 1,041,090 (5.6%) out of a total population of 18,491,092 of Nepal, but Newari speakers comprise only 3.7% of the total population of Nepal (Dahal, 1995:152). According to the census report of 1961 "As a language spoken in every district of the kingdom Newari occupies the second place (p.44)" (Malla, 1989: 454). According to the 1971 census Newars are spread in 64 out of the 75 districts of the kingdom; surprisingly enough the number of Newari speakers is counted low in CBS reports each time: 383, 184 in 1952/54, 377,727 in 1961, 459,979 in 1971 and 448,746 in 1981; (Kansakar 1989:43) which always remained a matter of doubt and debate for Newar scholars (Joṣī 1991: 61-72, Malla 1991; 73-79, see *Nepāl* 39:58, 1991).

The new constitution of 1990 which introduces again a multiparty system, also appeared to have a multilingual nature. Although Nepālī was to remain the National language, in article 6 (1) all other languages were recognised as "languages of the nation" 6(2). Article 18 (1) states that all communities living in the kingdom have the right to preserve and promote their language, script and culture. And article 18(2) gives the right to primary schools to educate children in their mother tongue (Shrestha 1991).

But none of the Nepal's living languages were in the position to start primary education on their own. So far only a first Newari school in Kathmandu in 1991 and one Magar School in Kāskī have come into existence.

### The First Newari School

After the heavy campaign for education in the mother tongue one would expect Kathmandu to be mushrooming with primary schools. But on the contrary, in the whole valley only one school has been established, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, across the Viṣṇumatī (Before it was shifted to the present location it was at Cāgal Chāunī). Instead of Newari Schools, English Boarding Schools are booming. A great difference appears to exist between political demands and popular practice. With that question in mind we made a case study of the only Newari Primary school in the valley, the "Jagat Sundar Bvane Kuthi". The school was given this name because Jagat Sundar was an activist for education in the mother tongue during the repressive Rāṇā rule. Young Newar activists like Mr. Visnu Citrakār, Anār Vajracarya, Sorad Kasāh, Manudās Shrestha, Ames Vajrācārya and Rājbhāi Jakahmi are the founder members of the school.

The school was established in 1991 after the new constitution provided the right for it by abolishing the "One language, one nation" policy. In contrast to the commercial boarding schools, the one Newari school is heavily dependent on donations. Mr. Rājbhāi Jakahmi provided the house for school freely for one year, and Mr. Lakṣmīdās Mānandhar and other people supported it financially. Dr. Cunda Vajrācārya and her colleagues of Nepālḥāṣā Miṣā Khalah assisted in running the school. The teachers started to work as volunteers. It is impossible to mention all the benefactors here, except for the Japanese organisation Hirākātā Khātāno (for detail see *Souvenir* published by the School 1993) which supports the poor pupils and supplied Rs. 1,200,000 for a new school building, which was inaugurated by veteran politician Ganesh Man Singh in December 1993 just across the Viṣṇumatī at Kamkeśvarī unfortunately next to the cremation ground (ghāt). In an inaugural ceremony of the building in 1993, the Japanese organisation again supplied some more money, and recently an auditorium hall of the school has been built. The location is as yet disfavoured and hard to reach, but the school has plans to establish other branches.

The Jagat Sundar School has an impressive executive as well as curriculum committee, all full of idealism, as becomes clear from the aims of the school.

1. To teach pre-primary (Nursery) to primary education on health, literacy, and other subjects in the mother tongue for the development of not only knowledge but also a sound psychology, patriotism and love for Newari language.
2. To support the protection and development of Nepālḥāṣā literature and culture.
3. To give economic support to those children who want to be taught in their mother tongue.

4. To make educational materials for all subjects in Nepālbhāṣā, possibly with the support of HMG.
5. To open schools in other Newar communities.

### **The Pupils and Their Parents**

Given the dedication of the committees and the teachers, how is the situation on the ground? Who are the pupils?

Although an advertisement campaign was launched in several journals, most of the children were Jyāpu (farmers caste of Newar society) living around the area of the school in the year 1993. However, in 1994 the situation has changed a little bit; about half of the pupils are coming from various places around the city of Kathmandu. The main motive to attend this school is that it is cheaper than other boarding schools because of the lavish donations it receives. Castes like Poḍe (sweepers) and Nāy (butchers), if they are poor families, receive extra support through Japanese foster parents. In 1993, 36 out of a total of 123 pupils were sponsored. In 1994, 25 students were sponsored and another 11 were subsidized by the school itself.

Most children attend the school because it is cheap or nearby. Remarkably enough, in 1993 one third of the children attending the school were not Newar, but Brahmin, Kṣetri, Tāmāng, Gurung, Chaudharī, Ghale, Rāi, Magar, and Pariyār. But in 1994 the number of non-Newar decreased to 11.07%. They are handled with care by the teachers and if necessary, with Nepālī as well. Generally the school is also considered to be good, and parents are also content with the teaching of English from the nursery level onwards. But it is certainly not an elite school. The contrast with the various cultural organisations, the Nepālbhāṣā Academy, and the big political demonstrations for education in the mother tongue is striking. Facing various financial risks and saved by the generosity of donors, the three nursery classes and the two primary school classes had 123 pupils, 52 male and 71 female in 1993, increasing from 26 pupils in 1991 and 71 in 1992. But in 1994, in spite of the expansion by one more primary class 3, the number of students remained 123, 55 male and 68 female. Every year the number of pupils coming from downtown Kathmandu is increasing: in 1993 it was 41 and in 1994 it was 60. Meanwhile, however, the school shifted its location and drew its students from other quarters of Kathmandu, because the newly built school is somewhat closer to town than the previous location. A few parents whom we interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction with the new location. They said that the new location is not only very close to the cremation ground but to close to the heavily polluted Viṣṇumati River. But other parents were not so critical about the new location; they said they will send their children to the same school though it is not at the best location.

One remarkable thing is that in 1994, in spite of the addition of one more class (class 3), the number of students did not increase. The possible cause behind this may be the unfavourable location of the school.

From a sample of fifteen parents from different castes, most people (including Parbate speaking Newars, Tāmāṅg and Rāī) appreciated learning Newari as an additional language, but only two people out of the sample were idealistically speaking in favour of education in the mother tongue.

Most of the parents do not know what to do after primary education in the Jagat Sundar School. Some of them are confident that the school will introduce higher classes. They are in favour of upgrading classes in the school up to the School Leaving Certificate. Some said that it is a half hearted act of the government just to allow primary classes in Newari. They think the government must give permission to study in Newari from the lower level to the higher level classes in the school. A few of them also suggested that Newari be introduced as a medium in the public schools as well. At the same time they felt the necessity to open schools like the Jagat Sundar, which has no less quality than other commercial English Boarding Schools, in the other areas of Newar settlement.

In an interview the chairman of the executive committee of the school Mr. Lakṣmīdās Mānandhar, who is also one of the financial supporters of the school, said that schools like the Jagat Sundar must be made commercial in order to compete with other commercial English Boarding Schools. He thinks that, together with Newari, children must learn Nepālī and English side by side. In a city like Kathmandu where a large number of Newars are living, it is possible to run more than 25 schools like the Jagat Sundar. He said that on the one hand they are trying to open such schools themselves and on the other hand they are instigating others to open such schools. He said that they are trying to introduce Newari in public and private boarding schools of Kathmandu Valley. He thinks this will be the best way to achieve education in the mother tongue. A private initiative like the Jagat Sundar School is insufficient. He thinks that the permission to run only primary schools is also insufficient; HMG must give permission to teach Newari in higher classes of the schools, otherwise what children can do after their primary grades remains uncertain.

He also contributed financially to produce books in Newari for the school children in the Jagat Sundar School. He is hopeful of raising necessary funds from Newar businessmen. To build the present school he was active in raising funds from various Newar businessmen.

Mr. Padma Ratna Tulādhar, the chairman of the Nepābhāṣā Maṅkā Khalah from the beginning (1979) ... in the forefront of the language movement, is also an executive member of the Jagat Sundar School. In an interview he

said that Jagat Sundar School is an example of group initiative and individual effort. He thinks that HMG must take the responsibility to educate people. In a country like Nepal where several languages are spoken it is a violation of human rights to impose one language upon the others. The international declaration of human rights and organisations like UNESCO always emphasized the importance of education in the mother tongue, but the constitution of Nepal is unclear and nothing is said about the government's responsibility. Independent establishment of schools and production of a curriculum has proved almost impossible even for a community like the Newars, supposedly one of the richest ethnic groups of Nepal. It is impossible for other ethnic groups of Nepal. He thinks that public schools should be changed into mother tongue medium schools. Schools where the majority of students are Newars, like in the schools of Kathmandu City, must be changed into Newari medium schools. In the hills where Tāmāng or other language groups are in the majority, the schools must also be changed into mother tongue medium ones. He said that the government is not serious about different language groups of Nepal and their problems. Though it is said that a democratic system exists in Nepal since 1990, there is no democracy at all when we talk about the language problem.

Mr. Hitkar Vīr Sing Kaṃsākār is an experienced headmaster, an education expert, a social worker as well as a member in the curriculum committee of the Jagat Sundar School. From a practical point of view, opening a school and producing necessary books is an extremely difficult task by itself, he said, very expensive. To make it practical, he thinks that present public schools as well as boarding schools must gradually introduce subjects in the mother tongue. The first step should be to make one subject in the mother tongue available in all public and private boarding schools. In this way, the mother tongue medium schools will be practical and inexpensive.

Regarding the curriculum, he said that though Newari is a rich language in its literary tradition there are insufficient suitable materials to make it a medium of instruction in schools. Books must be made in various subjects, and he thinks the government must subsidise the production of educational materials in Newari, as it is doing now for Nepālī.

He said the government must not close the door after having allowed primary education to be given in the mother tongue, but should also give permission to open lower secondary and secondary schools in the mother tongue. Unless HMG assures higher education in the mother tongue up to the School Leaving Certificate, uncertainty remains for those children who are going to a mother tongue medium school. Government-aided public schools like his own Paropakār High School still teach in Nepālī medium, although 50 percent of the students are Newars, for whom it is very difficult.



In this case the difficulty could be solved by introducing Newari as a medium of instruction for approximately half of the classes.

### **HMG Policy on Mother Tongue Education**

Though the new constitution of 1990 granted limited rights to various language groups of Nepal to start mother tongue medium schools by themselves, HMG is unprepared to take any burden. As in the Panchayat time, HMG ignores the public voice: Despite heavy demonstrations demanding education in the mother tongue and against the imposition of Sanskrit in 1992, HMG introduced a new curriculum in September 1993 which made Sanskrit obligatory in grades 6,7 and 8, whereas it fully ignored the issue of the mother tongue medium education.

At the primary level from grade one to five, one optional subject is suggested under which a school can introduce any local language for which the school itself has to arrange everything including a teacher. For the School Leaving Certificate students in grades 9 and 10, one optional subject is suggested under which Newari or Maithili as languages of the nation can be taught. But it is made vague; one has to choose Newari or Maithili from among not only twenty other international and classical languages but also vocational subjects, arts, humanities and social sciences, demography, journalism, computer science, environmental science, mathematics, and so forth (60 subjects in total). In grades 9 and 10 beside this optional subject six other subjects are obligatory: Nepāli, Mathematics, English, Social Studies, Science and Environmental education and one subject up to choice from Health, Computer Science and Demography. Each subject is taught 40 to 45 minutes daily and carries 100 marks in the final examinations. For all subjects the instruction medium is Nepāli. No words are spent on the role of the other languages of Nepal in education.

### **Why Education in the Mother Tongue and How?**

The popular demand for education in the mother tongue is low. It is the so-called English Boarding Schools which are flourishing among the Newars of Kathmandu. The sense for the children's career easily supersedes language idealism. Not all Newars, however, belong to the high and educated class.

The poorer section of society (still the greatest part) cannot gain command of a language English or Nepāli, which are foreign to them, and in which they have to learn other subjects. They are bound, however, to public schools in which Nepāli is the only medium of instruction and are therefore likely to drop out.

A recent study done by the research centre for Educational Innovation and Development of Tribhuvan University has shown that

The non-use of the mother tongue of the non-Nepali speaking pupil as a medium of instruction is known to be one of the conclusive contributing factors to the high rate of attrition in primary education in Nepal [Yadav 1992:179].

Nepal is a multi-lingual, multinational country (see Tāmāng 1987) where 32 language are spoken, as the CBS reports for 1992. But Ramawatar Yadav observes in the same article that the linguistic and demographic data reported by CBS are inaccurate: there are at least 70 languages belonging to four language families in Nepal (Ibid. 183, see also Toba 1992:23-24). To enforce one language upon others in such a country is to eliminate the others together with their culture and identity.

Knowledge is best achieved through the mother tongue. International organisations like UNESCO have recommended using the mother tongue in education as early as 1951, because it is culturally, psychologically and pedagogically more appropriate to do so. (Yadav, Ibid.) There is no scientific ground to impose a language upon others.

On the other hand, preservation and to promotion of a language is not only for the sake of the language but also for the culture, tradition and indigenous originality carried by that language.

"Language is at the core of each culture, and it is only by language that culture can be transmitted and communicated [Van den Hoek 1988:8].

Language is an emotionally charged issue. Once a language or ethnic sentiment grows in a certain community, it does not die until it achieves its goal. In South Asian countries language has always been a vital issue. The imposition of Hindi as a national language in India remains a matter of debate, with all non-Hindi speaking people of India against it. The Gorkhāland movement, Jhārkhand movement all are in one way or another related to language sentiments in India. Because of language discrimination, Srilanka has been experiencing great violence for decades. Nepal has to learn lessons in a positive and constructive way from these examples.

For a long time mostly Newars were in front in, advocating their language and culture, but since the Federation of the Nationalities of Nepal (Nepal Janajāti Mahāsaṅgha) took shape in 1991, already twentytwo ethnic groups have shown their solidarity to achieve equal rights for their languages and cultures. In an interview the general Secretary of the federation clearly said that

... as long as discrimination is there, there is no question of unity  
... (we) object to the imposition of Nepali language on us [Magar 1992:6].

Gentlemanly speaking ethnic groups of today can easily turn violent if their demands continue to be ignored. Some intellectuals like Dilli R. Dahal (1995) suggest that, "There is no base for ethnic politics at the grass root level or the rural society of Nepal in general." Other intellectuals like Krishna B. Bhattachan suggest that "Caste and ethnicity being important components of Nepalese social structure, denial of ethnopolitics and ethnodevelopment has done more harm than good for various castes and ethnic groups. Diversity is the beauty of Nepalese social structure. Therefore 'legalization of ethnopolitics' is crucial for ethnodevelopment (1995:144)."

The world history of ethnic violence and uprising can hardly support Dahal's assurance, and it may prove to be a great mistake to ignore the problem.

Prof. Prayag Raj Sharma has emphasised the need of education in the mother tongue as far back as 1974:

The right to learn a minority language in primary or secondary grades or even higher up in school should not be denied to those for whom it is a mother tongue and a chance should be given to the more developed languages to play a creative role in our society (1976:171).

Education in mother tongues can be a first step towards developing mutual understanding among various language groups of Nepal; in that regard the Federation of the Nationalities of Nepal (Nepal Janajāti Mahāsangh) is most vocal.

From the case of the Newari Jagat Sundar School, it has become clear that to establish a school and produce educational materials on one's own is more idealistic than practical. Even for Newars, one of the richest communities of Nepal, it proved rather fanciful. For most other language groups of Nepal it will certainly be impossible.

Since the one nation, one language policy was dropped in the new constitution (HMG 1990:2), there is every opportunity for HMG to adopt a progressive policy to supply necessary educational materials and to appoint teachers for mother tongue instruction in schools. This would in addition provide the necessary employment for teachers in the towns and in the villages all over Nepal. It is recommendable that HMG appoints Newar teachers to public schools in the cities and especially in the smaller towns of the valley. Likewise, Tāmāng, Gurung, Rāi, Limbu, Magar, and Thāru teachers should be appointed in other areas, to overcome the first barrier of primary education. Gradually other national, international and classical languages may be introduced in upper classes. It will be unnecessary to open

separate schools if HMG adopts this policy. Introduction of the mother tongue medium into the present schools will certainly not cost much more than to open new schools for each language group of Nepal.

The government must also make necessary regulations to introduce mother tongues in the so called English Boarding Schools currently mushrooming in the Kathmandu valley and other main cities of Nepal. This will certainly be one of the most effective ways towards education in the mother tongue.

After primary education in the mother tongue, the question remains what will be the next step. Therefore the mother tongue as the medium of instruction should gradually be introduced in to the upper classes too. At present the medium of examinations for the School Leaving Certificate (S.L.C.) is only in Nepālī and English. Once mother tongues are introduced in schools this restriction should be lifted and students must be allowed to give the S.L.C. exam in their own mother tongue. Only then will education in the mother tongue be senseful.

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