

# State, Language Contestations, And Borderlands: The Case Of Dhubri Borderland Along The Indo-Bangladesh Border In Assam

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## ABSTRACT

The Dhubri borderland along the Indo-Bangladesh border in Assam is a site of significant language contestation. Borderlands typically facilitate cultural exchanges, resulting in shared cultural traits such as language, attire, and cuisine. In Dhubri, the linguistic landscape reflects a historical and ongoing struggle influenced by British colonial language policies, which fostered a conflict between Assamese and Bengali speakers. The Assam Official Language Act 1960, which established Assamese as the official language of Assam, intensified this contestation, particularly affecting the local Bengali-speaking population. The Bhatia Muslims of Dhubri face a unique challenge: mastering Assamese to deal with socio-political dynamics and avoid issues related to citizenship status while maintaining their Bengali dialect in daily life. This study examines the complex language dynamics in Dhubri borderland, tracing their historical roots from colonial times to the present, and explores how borderlanders balance their distinct cultural identity with the pressures of linguistic assimilation.

**Keywords:** border, borderland, language, identity

## Introduction:

Language serves as a fundamental unifying force, cementing the bonds within societies and fostering a shared sense of identity and culture. (Majumder, 2014, p. 1). According to D. P. Pattanayak, 'Language gives identity to a person, to a social group, to a geographical entity and to a nation.' He also points out, 'Language symbolises social and cultural identities, and therefore, in any clash of cultures, in any crisis of identities, language is used as the instrument of political action.' (Pattanayak, D.P. 1981, p. 1.) It can help in uniting the people of a society and encourage the people to literary pursuits. Besides, language being a cementing force in consolidating a particular community, it may at the same time, have an opposite effect too.

The Dhubri borderland along the Indo-Bangladesh border in Assam presents a unique and complex linguistic landscape, characteristic of the broader socio-political dynamics at play in border regions. Borderlands are inherently spaces of cultural intermingling, where the confluence of diverse traditions gives rise to shared cultural traits such as language, attire, and food. However, these zones are also arenas of contestation and negotiation, where historical legacies and contemporary policies shape the lived experiences of their inhabitants. In Dhubri, language contestation is a salient feature, reflecting deeper issues of identity, citizenship, and political power.

The historical roots of linguistic conflict in Dhubri can be traced back to the British colonial era, during which language policies sowed the seeds of discord between Assamese and Bengali speakers. The introduction of Assamese as the official language of Assam through the 1960 Official Language Act further exacerbated these tensions, particularly marginalising the local Bengali-speaking population. Among those most affected by these dynamics are the Bhatia Muslims of Dhubri, who navigate a delicate balance between linguistic assimilation and cultural preservation. On the one hand, proficiency in Assamese is essential for socio-political integration and avoiding complications related to citizenship status. On the other, maintaining their Bengali dialect is crucial for preserving their cultural heritage and daily social interactions. This dual

linguistic identity highlights the broader theme of how borderland communities negotiate their identities amidst external pressures.

This study delves into the intricate language dynamics in Dhubri, examining their evolution from colonial times to the present day. It aims to shed light on the historical and contemporary factors that shape language use in this borderland, exploring how residents balance their distinct cultural identities with the demands of linguistic assimilation. Through this lens, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between state policies, language contestations, and the lived realities of borderland communities.

### **Language as Identity: Conceptual Insights from Assam:**

Language is one of the most significant markers of ethnic identity, as highlighted by Ashutosh Varshney. (Varshney 2006, p. 427) It plays a crucial role in the formation of nationality, intertwining with culture, religion, and history to shape collective identity. (Samuel, 1993, p. 91). Language is both a medium and a component of national identity, reflecting the history and experiences of a community. The transition from community to ethnicity, and eventually to nationality, is deeply connected to language in functional, symbolic, and indexical ways. As individuals navigate between different communities and ethnic groups, language serves as a bridge that connects them to their heritage and roots. The preservation and promotion of a particular language can also be seen as a form of resistance against assimilation and cultural erasure. In many cases, linguistic diversity is celebrated and protected as a valuable part of a nation's identity, leading to policies and initiatives that aim to preserve and promote minority languages. Ultimately, language is not just a means of communication but a powerful tool that shapes and defines the collective identity of a nation.

In the early 19th century, Indian nationalism developed at two levels: a pan-Indian level based on cultural homogeneity and anti-imperialism and a regional level based on local cultural identities. These two forms of nationalism were initially intertwined, but post-colonial India saw regional nationalism, which was strongly influenced by language, overshadow the pan-Indian form. Language has since remained a central and often contentious issue in India's socio-political landscape, influencing the reorganisation of states and shaping political structures.

India's language controversy, spanning over two centuries, began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and is marked by social conflicts. George Grierson's linguistic survey identified 179 languages and 544 dialects in India, categorised into four family groups: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman. Historically, Sanskrit served as a unifying language in ancient India, where cultural unity often outweighed political disunity. Modern Indian languages have heavily borrowed from Sanskrit. During British colonial rule, English and vernacular languages replaced Persian as official languages in various regions by 1837, significantly impacting the socio-political fabric of the country.

In Assam, language became the primary marker of identity, unlike in other parts of India, where religion and caste also played significant roles. The British policy of making Bengali the official language of Assam from 1836 to 1873 marginalised the Assamese language, leading to widespread discontent among different social classes. This policy had far-reaching socio-political implications, fostering a sense of collective linguistic identity and paving the way for Assamese linguistic nationalism. The introduction of Bengali as the official language in Assam had detrimental effects on the Assamese people. Unfamiliar with Bengali, Assamese peasants faced significant hardships in legal and administrative matters. The judicial process, conducted in Bengali, was incomprehensible to most Assamese, causing them to rely on Bengali transcribers, which often resulted in miscarriages of justice. The petty bourgeoisie, hoping to secure employment in the new administrative system, found themselves disadvantaged as positions were filled by Bengali speakers from East Bengal.

The American Baptist Mission played a crucial role in promoting the Assamese language, advocating for its use in education and official matters. Their efforts, along with those of Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, were instrumental in the eventual restoration of Assamese as the official language in 1873. This marked the first significant expression of Assamese national consciousness through the language.

It is notable to mention here that the pre-colonial Assam went into the British hands in the year 1826 at the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War. (Banerji, 1964) From 1826 to 1873, Assam was administered as a part of Bengal. In 1874, it was made a Chief Commissioner's province, and a significant portion of the Bengali-speaking areas of Cachar, Sylhet, and Goalpara came under the provincial administration in Assam. Again, in 1905, when Bengal was divided into West and East, East Bengal, a predominantly Bengali Muslim province, also incorporated Assam. But in 1912, the British abolished the partition and re-established Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner's province, which included the predominantly Bengali Muslim districts of Sylhet and pre-dominantly Bengali Hindu districts of Cachar, and these arrangements continued to be in existence till the partition of India in 1947. (Weiner, 1975) The developments also brought other changes in the socio-economic and political life of Assam. The British administration encouraged immigrants from different parts of India, especially from East Bengal, for their own benefit, and these migrants also started gradually becoming a part of larger Assamese society by adopting Assamese as their mother tongue. But when Bengali was declared the official language of the courts by the British, there was a dominance of Bengali everywhere as recruitment of Bengalis in government services increased, and this issue, along with the migrant issues together, led to the development of resentment amongst the Assamese people as the

Assamese speaking people considered it as a threat to their identity and existence as language gives identity to a person, to a social group, to a geographical entity as well as to a nation. (Majumdar, 2014). Maheswar Neog argues that the sudden introduction of Bengali in Assam had a surprising impact on the masses. It has already been mentioned that initially, the Baptist Missionaries and the educated Assamese elite section stood against this language policy adopted by the British government. The historical development of language issues reflects the fact that vigorous protests were made by the Assamese people for the restoration of Assamese languages in schools. As the Assamese language and culture were threatened by the educated Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of Sylhet and the poor Muslim immigrants, hence the Assam Pradesh Congress stood for separating the Bengali-speaking Sylhet from Assam and, accordingly, with partition, Sylhet was separated from Assam. In this regard, it is important to mention that Assam was also threatened by the refugee influx from Sylhet even after independence. Since 1947, periodic and large influxes of population from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) kept coming into Assam, West Bengal and adjoining Bihar. The district which sheltered the largest number of refugees was Cachar due to its proximity to Sylhet, followed by Goalpara and Kamrup. (Assam Gazette). It was alleged that such a large number of Bengali Hindu and Muslim people posed a threat to the demographic composition as well as to the socio-economic condition of the state of Assam. The growing resentment among the Assamese people against this issue even prompted the caste Hindu-led Assamese middle class to restore the Assamese language to preserve the cultural identity of Assam.

Notably, in the post-independence period, during the government of Gopinath Bordoloi, the quest for a cultural and linguistic identity compelled the Assam government to undertake some measures for the restoration of the Assamese language, and Assamese was introduced as a medium of instruction in schools, including primary schools. Gradually, the grant to Bengali medium schools was refused. The Bordoloi government left no stone unturned to restore the Assamese language for the homogeneity of the province. (Dutta, 2016) Gradually, it was seen that the number of Assamese-speaking people significantly increased in the 1951 Census. (Choudhuri, 1982)

It is important to note that there have been different views regarding introducing the Bengali language as the official language of the state by the British, which influenced the language-based Assamese nationalism in the post-independence period. In this context, the views of noted historian H.K. Barpujari can be noted. Barpujari stated that the British introduced the Bengali language for their administrative convenience. It has been found in the *Samachar Darpan*, 1831, that the medium of instruction in the schools established by David Scott would be the Bengali language. (*Samachar Darpan*, 1831) Again, the office of the Fourth William, in response to a letter from Scott, ordered on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1830 that the Bengali language should be introduced in place of Persia. (Barpujari, 1983) Even there had been many British administrators who believed that Assamese was only a dialect of Bengali language and had no literature of its own. (Barpujari, 1999) In this context, the views of Maheswar Neog may be noted. Neog stated that the British had this pre-notion that Assamese was just a patois of Bengali. Therefore, the Assamese's struggle was not just a struggle to restore it but also to establish the fact that it is a language that had an existence independent of Bengali. (Orunodoi) Moreover, there have been some people who were of the view that Assamese has been derived from Bengali; if there are any similarities between these languages, it is only because of their common origins. (Neog, 1983) However, there were some British rulers like A.H. Danforth who had raised their voices against imposing Bengali, which, in his view, had an injurious effect on Assamese society and the educational system prevalent during that time.

The issue of language cannot be studied alone without mentioning the issue of nationality formation in Assam. The resentment among the Assamese people for their language, which was affected by the imposition of the Bengali language, had led to a situation in which a section of Assamese intellectuals demanded secession from India to save the Assamese race. (Guha, 1977)) and it indicated the development of Assamese nationalism among the Assamese people. In this regard, the efforts made by some Assamese are noteworthy. Anandaram Dhakiyal Phukan and others have started the process of standardisation of the Assamese language by writing Assamese grammar and dictionary, and these people, in this way, rooted the seeds of linguistic nationalism in Assam.

The struggle for linguistic identity in Assam transcended class divisions, uniting various social strata in a common cause. The Assamese middle class, though nascent, played a pivotal role in this movement, supported by peasants and the upper class. Civil society organisations like the Asam Sahitya Sabha emerged as key players in promoting linguistic nationalism. Nani Gopal Mahanta (Mahanta, 2013, p. 6) argues that the Sabha has been central to the ongoing language-based identity formation in Assam, a process initiated during the colonial period and continuing to influence Assamese society.

Language thus became a supra-class entity in Assam, symbolising collective unity and national identity. The Assamese experience underscores the intricate relationship between language, identity, and socio-political dynamics, illustrating how language policies can shape the trajectory of national consciousness and unity. The legacy of colonial language policies continues to resonate in Assam, reflecting the enduring power of language as a marker of identity and a catalyst for socio-political change.

### State, Language Contestations and the Dhubri Borderland:

In the pre-British era till 1826, the kingdom of Assam was ruled by Ahom Kings, and its capital was in different parts of Eastern (Upper) Assam. There were variations among the languages spoken in the region, and they were quite different from the written form of the standard language. In the same way, there were variations between the languages spoken in Eastern and Western Assam, comprising the districts of Kamrup up to Goalpara and Dhubri. (Kakati, 1962). Dhubri district, located in the far western corner of Assam, is one of the three civil sub-divisions of the former Goalpara district, established in 1876 during British rule. Dhubri, being the border district, is considered the gateway to Western Assam. It came into contact with various races, castes, and creeds of local people, as well as invaders and migrated people. Due to the assimilation of all these, Dhubri has witnessed the growth of a mixed culture in that region, especially in the case of language, art, and religion. In other words, Dhubri possesses a rich archaeological and cultural heritage from the ancient time. As far as the religious composition is concerned, as per official Census data of 2011, Muslims are the majority in the district, covering 79.67% of the total population, while Hindus constitute the minority, forming 19.92% of the total population. The primary local language of the district is Goalporia, popularly known as 'Deshi Bhasha.' Along with this, Assamese and Bengali languages are also simultaneously spoken.

When discussing the border areas of Dhubri district, it is crucial to note that these areas comprise both plain and riverine regions with distinct demographic, religious, socio-economic, and political characteristics. The residents of the borderland face their own unique and shared challenges. It is important to note that the nature of the border is also responsible for determining various socio-economic and political aspects of the borderland. The nature of the border does have an impact on the lives of borderland inhabitants in different ways. The India-Bangladesh border is a porous border, and the porosity of the border most often helps maintain transnational relations in various aspects of life. The inhabitants of Dhubri borderland are structurally Indian but are not different from their Bangladeshi counterparts across the border in other elements. (Hassan, 2018) The porous nature of the border enables cultural exchange, economic opportunities, and social interactions among people on both sides, leading to a fusion of identities and relationships that surpass national borders. Those in the Dhubri borderland frequently have connections across the border, emphasising the interdependence of the two countries. Thus, the India-Bangladesh border significantly influences the lives and experiences of borderland residents.

As far as the language in the Dhubri borderland is concerned, at present, though the Goalporia dialect of Assamese (which is neither Assamese nor Bengali but a mixture of both) is extensively used by the common people but, people are becoming more Assamese than Goalporia one, as Assamese is the official language of the district. Regarding language, many views have been found. The Census of India 1921 mentioned, "at the Bengal end, they speak it with a tinge of Bengali; at the Assam end with a tinge of Assamese and in between with a tinge of both." (Census of India, 1921) It has been seen that borderland people with their own cultural traits live as a separate group within the larger Assamese society. It is important to note that the peripheral demography of Dhubri resembles both the northern and eastern parts of Bangladesh. The societies of border areas are close to the Bengali culture and with Assamese and Bengali, they create a new culture with the name of Goalporia or sometimes Deshi. The borderland people, who are mostly Muslim by religion, prefer to identify themselves as Deshi, which means the local inhabitants living in their own territorial domain. (Hassan, 2018) Hence there have been various instances that state that people of border areas of Dhubri deny their identity as Assamese or Bengali. According to them, Assamese and Bengali both are their neighbours. They are the inhabitants of that region.

Again, Gaurinath Shastri (1928), a prominent personality of the locality, stated, "We have never been either Assamese or Bengali. They are both our neighbours. Who are we? We are neither of the two. We are we. We are the people of this area. We are Goalparia .... we are distinct, and so are our culture, customs and traditions." (Mishra, 2011) In the words of Prabhat Chandra Baruah, "Our District has become the victim of political football. We have been forced to accept as our mother tongue the languages of those communities which have scored a goal." The opinion of these people clearly reflects that in the Dhubri borderland, linguistic contestation has prevailed over the years due to the changing political discourses. The people of Goalparia take pride in their unique identity and refuse to be defined by the languages and cultures of their neighbouring communities. Despite being caught in the crossfire of political agendas, they remain persistent in preserving their own language, customs, and traditions.

The changing political map of Assam during the British reign also impacted the socio-cultural aspects of different communities residing within the territory of Assam. Another vital context that can be addressed in relation to this discussion is the faulty demarcation of the Indo-Bangladesh border, which also impacts the borderland communities in a significant way. The border was demarcated in such a way that divided families while making one an Indian citizen and the other a citizen of Bangladesh. Hence, the idea of national identity in the borderlands tended to be diluted or vague. When trying to find out the religious composition there in the Dhubri borderland, one will witness people belonging to both Hinduism and Islam who live in those areas. As far as Hindus are concerned, they constitute the majority in bordering villages like Ramraikuthi, Satrasal, Agomoni, and Bishkhowa, where people belonging to different caste groups live. Generally, Koch Rajbanshi people are in the majority in those areas. In the same way, as far as Muslim people are concerned, they are the majority in villages like Phulkakata, Taakimari, Paatamari, Tistarpar, Baladuba, Char

Kumarghati etc. Within the Muslims, both Bhatia and Deshi people are found in the borderland. The Deshi Muslims speak the Assamese language, while the Bhatia (the migrated people from East Bengal) Muslims speak a language called Bhatia, which is neither Assamese nor purely Bengali. But a mixture of both. These Bhatia Muslims are also known by the name Na-Asamiya Muslims (Neo-Assamese Muslims) who came to Assam mainly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and settled in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in large numbers. These Muslim groups of people are also known by the name Pamua Musalman (the farming Muslim), Charua Musalman (the Muslims of river islands), Miya Musalman and Mymensingh (Muslims from Mymensingh district of erstwhile East Bengal, present Bangladesh). During the later Medieval period, East Bengal was known as Bhatidesh, and those who migrated from this land to Assam were known as Bhatia Muslims. (Ahmed, 2010) These Muslim groups of people mostly reside in the district of Cooch Behar, and a substantial amount of people belonging to this group are also found in the districts of South and North Dinajpur and their mother tongue is Bengali, a sort of dialect. (West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes) It has been observed that in the Dhubri borderland, the Bhatia people have adopted the Assamese language as their mother tongue, but there was a time when the Bhati people found it to be an imposition on them. In this context, the views expressed by Matiur Rahman Mia, who told the Assam Assembly on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1938, can be noted. In his words, "We are Bengalees. Our mother tongue is Bengalee ... Under the circumstances, this Assamese language has been imposed as a new burden on our shoulders, on our children's shoulders, and if we are deprived of our mother tongue, then that will amount to depriving our children of opportunities of education." (Guha, 2006)

On the contrary, this view has been found against them, that the Bhati people (the Muslim immigrants) were more concerned with acquiring land rights than preserving their language (Guha, 2006), as these Bhatia people have traditionally been engaged in cultivation. However, in the contemporary period, the language of the Bhati people has been enhanced by the inclusion of various words from the languages of different communities residing along the border. Regarding their language, Lakhminath Bezbaroah once stated that the people of Bhati are welcome to speak their own dialects at home. It is an expression of their love for their birthplace. But Assamese is the public property of the entire Assamese community, and it is best to keep differences aside (Mishra, 2011) as Assamese was declared the official language of Assam by passing the Assam Official Language Act of 1960. It is important to note that the Bhatia and the Deshi people of the Dhubri borderland have accepted Assamese as their official language and declared this as their mother tongue in the Census. The consequence is that there is not a single Bengali-medium school to be found in the entire Dhubri borderland which, in fact, is unlike the Karimganj-Cachar sector of the Indo-Bangladesh border. Thus, in terms of language, they have assimilated more with the Assamese fold than their Karimganj-Cachar counterpart.

Recently, the Assam government in July 2022 approved the identification of five Assamese Muslim sub-groups, i.e., Goriyas, Moriyas, Julhas, Deshis and Syeds, as 'indigenous' Assamese Muslim communities. As per the government statement, "This will ensure their development in health, cultural identity, education, financial inclusion, skill development and women empowerment." The question arises on such attempts of government where the recognition of Deshis as an indigenous Assamese Muslim community may create a sense of insecurity among the Bhatias residing in the Dhubri borderland and may further deepen their feelings of being marginalised and excluded from the development initiatives provided to the recognised indigenous communities. However, the ground reality that exists there in the Dhubri borderland says that the Bhatia people have not considered this development from this perspective.

It is worth mentioning that language serves as a vehicle of social change and interaction and also the most effective instrument of culture, which has the power to tie different sections of people irrespective of caste, creed, religion, etc. and also inculcates a sense of belongingness. (Basid, 2016) Hence, in any identity crisis, language works as the instrument of political action. (Majumdar, 2014) The Bhatia people, though, have accepted the Assamese language as their mother tongue, but their inefficiency in speaking the language properly leads them to suffer from an identity crisis. In other words, this group of people has been caught up in language disputes in Assam. The language disputes in the region further aggravate the identity crisis experienced by the Bhatia community, highlighting the complex relationship between language, identity, and social belonging. Further, the educational system in Assam has a significant role in shaping linguistic identities. The absence of Bengali-medium schools in the Dhubri borderland forces their children to be educated in Assamese. Over time, this education policy fosters greater fluency in Assamese among younger generations, promoting assimilation into the Assamese-speaking community. This shift can sometimes lead to the erosion of the Bhatia dialect, contributing to an identity crisis where individuals feel disconnected from their cultural and linguistic heritage.

The standard narrative prevailing in the Dhubri borderland is that the mainstream Assamese consider their inhabitants illegal migrants coming from neighbouring Bangladesh because of their inefficiency in speaking the Assamese language fluently and other cultural similarities with the people of the other side of the border. In the context of the above discussion, the relationship between language and religion may be mentioned. According to Davis, language and religion depend on one another in both immediate and profound ways. On the other hand, migration policies such as the NRC (National Register of Citizens) and CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) have profoundly influenced the demographic and linguistic landscape of Dhubri borderland. These policies have created a sense of uncertainty among many residents, particularly the Bhatia



Muslims, who fear being excluded from citizenship lists. This insecurity often manifests in efforts to adopt the Assamese language more rigorously to affirm their Indian identity, as Assamese is seen as the language of the state's majority and a marker of legitimate citizenship.

However, in the recent past, there have been some attempts on the part of Bhatia (Miya) people to develop their literature and culture in their dialect, which is known as "Miya poetry", showing their urge and assertion for their identity and belongingness. However, in the bordering areas of Dhubri district, these developments have been found to be less. The ground reality talks about how language creates a barrier between them and the mainland people of Assam. Nowadays, however, the younger generation of Dhubri is found to be more concerned about developing fluency in speaking Assamese to get out of the identity crisis. Thus, language as a marker of politics plays its role in the Dhubri borderland.

The intricate relationship between state policies and the socio-political dynamics in the Dhubri borderland underscores the region's complex linguistic identity. Historically, the arbitrary demarcation of borders and the porous nature of the India-Bangladesh border have led to a unique blend of cultural and linguistic elements in Dhubri. This fusion is evident in the widespread use of the Goalporia dialect, which incorporates aspects of both Assamese and Bengali. Despite Assamese being the official language, the borderland people, especially the Bhatia Muslims, often face an identity crisis due to their distinct linguistic heritage. Political measures like the NRC and CAA further exacerbate these tensions, creating uncertainty and prompting a stronger adoption of Assamese to affirm their citizenship. Additionally, recent governmental recognition of specific indigenous Assamese Muslim communities highlights the political manoeuvring around ethnic identities, potentially marginalising groups like the Bhatias. While movements like Miya poetry represent efforts to assert Bhatia identity, such cultural assertions are less visible in Dhubri. These dynamics show how language and identity are deeply influenced by state policies and political agendas, shaping the everyday lives and identities of Dhubri borderlanders.

### Conclusion:

Thus, it is evident that the Dhubri borderland serves as a microcosm for understanding the intricate interplay between state policies, language contestations, and identity. The historical and contemporary language dynamics in Dhubri borderland reflect broader regional and national tensions, underscoring the need for nuanced approaches to linguistic and cultural integration in borderland areas.

It has become apparent from the discussion made above that language has been an issue of political debate since the formation of the British Colonial province of Assam in 1874. From that time onwards, disputes over language became prevalent as the Assamese felt the dominance of Bengali not only in administration but also found it a threat to the Assamese language, its culture and identity. Dhubri borderland has been the victim of such language contestations for which the bordering people specially the Bhatias live in a dilemmatic situation of citizen or non-citizen, as they are viewed through the lenses of suspicion because of their similarities in language with the people on the other side of the border. It has become apparent from the study that language issues have significantly affected the borderland inhabitants of Dhubri.

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