

India in the World; The World in India 1450–1770

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“WORLD HISTORY” MEANS MANY THINGS to many scholars, teachers, and students. So does “Indian History.” This article explicitly brings these two enterprises together, to situate the history of India in ongoing larger processes that were transforming the entire world through three centuries, from the second half of the fifteenth century to the second half of the eighteenth. It asks several fundamental questions: Which people and processes brought India into greater participation in the wider world outside its borders? Which originated from outside India and which from within? How did India change? How did the world?

Geography is central to these questions, and Joseph Schwartzberg’s monumental *Historical Atlas of South Asia* is a good place to begin. Schwartzberg identifies two major events that dramatically enlarged the relationships between India and the outside world during our time period:

The years 1498 and 1526 brought to the stage of South Asian history two events of profound significance: the former year marked Vasco da Gama’s arrival in Calicut after a sea voyage round the southern tip of Africa; the latter witnessed the implantation of Mughal rule in Delhi. Together these events may be thought of as precursors of the modern age. In their aftermath, Indian history increasingly became a part of world history.¹

These two events, the arrival of European traders by sea and of Mughal conquerors by land, transformed India and the world.² The Europeans arrived before the establishment of the Mughal Empire, but the ancestors of the Mughals arrived still earlier, by more than a century.

FROM MONGOL TO MUGHAL TO INDIAN

“Mughal” is a corruption of the term Mongol, one of the peoples from whom the Mughals were descended. Chinggis Khan (c. 1162–1227), the founder of the Mongol Empire, conquered all the lands from eastern China to southern Russia, creating the largest land empire the world has ever seen. He reached the banks of the Indus River, but, like Alexander the Great fifteen hundred years earlier, he withdrew and turned his attention to other conquests. As the Mongols expanded their holdings, they absorbed large regions of Turkish peoples and began to merge, intermarry, and join forces with them. The line between Mongols and Turks blurred and, religiously, the Mongols in Central Asia followed the Turks in accepting Islam, the religion of the lands they conquered.

After Chinggis’ death, his empire divided into four, each headed by a direct descendent. Timur (1336–1405), known in the west as Tamurlane, one of the most daring military leaders in history, became head of the Chaghatai Khanate in the territory directly north of India, across the Himalayas. In 1398, Timur raided Delhi, overthrowing the existing Turkish Tughluq dynasty, and raiding its treasuries, but then withdrawing to fight in other far-flung regions from Syria to Russia to Xinjiang in Central Asia. About a century after Timur’s raids, one of



Portrait of Chinggis Khan. Yuan Dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
Image source: <http://www.mongolianculture.com/Genghis%20Khan.html>

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his direct descendents, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), returned not only to raid but also to rule. Invading from Turan (Uzbekistan), Babur captured Kabul, in today’s Afghanistan, in 1504, and established his base there. In 1526, he continued southeastward into India, won the battle of Panipat, just north of Delhi, and proceeded to occupy Delhi and Agra. Mughal use of gunpowder technology, particularly guns and cannon, proved critically important in their conquest over the Turkic, Muslim rulers—known collectively as the Sultanate of Delhi—that had been ruling north India for some 300 years, beginning in 1206.³

Babur’s son Humayun was driven out of India temporarily by the Afghan armies of Sher Khan Sur, but with the military assistance of the Turkish Safavid rulers of Persia, Humayun was able to reconquer Delhi in 1555. When he died the next year, his son and successor, Akbar, came to the throne. Akbar ruled for fifty years (1556–1605) as one of the most powerful and intellectually adventuresome of all of India’s historic rulers. Akbar improved the existing administrative system by surveying the land carefully and levying land taxes efficiently. He structured both civilian and military administrations, which checked and balanced each other, in a hierarchy stretching from the center to the *pargana* (sub-district) level. To his administrators he allocated *jagirs*, specific tracts of land and their revenues. The later Mughal emperors and British rulers continued to utilize and enhance the administrative and land revenue systems implemented by Akbar.

India is the one major culture area of the world that was conquered by Muslims but did not generally accept Islam, unlike the Mongols, North Africans, Middle Easterners, Turks, and Persians. Acutely aware of this, Akbar famously moved to accommodate the indigenous Hindu majority under his Islamic government, without conversion. First, he

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Painting of Akbar (center) with his son, Jahangir, on his right, and his grandson, Shah Jahan, on his left.
Image source: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/ipeterso/images/IndCivGallery/pages/akbar.htm>

augmented his elite military corps, which had been mostly Turks, Central Asians, and Persians, with indigenous Indians, mostly Muslims, but also Hindus. Second, Akbar encouraged the marriage of Hindu women with Mughal nobles, taking Hindu wives into his own harem. He also abolished the *jizya*, head tax, on non-Muslims. Akbar invited representatives from various religions—Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Christians—to discuss their faiths with him. Akbar, and later Mughal rulers, built elaborate capitals that assimilated Hindu and Muslim styles of architecture. The most cosmopolitan capital of all, Fatehpur Sikri, was built by Akbar as a spectacular architectural amalgam of Persian, Afghan, Hindu, and Jain styles.⁴ “In every way possible the emperor tried to make the imperial system inclusive rather than exclusive.”⁵

Akbar’s grandson, Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1659) attempted to extend his control back into the regions from which the Mughals had entered India: Kandahar in western Afghanistan, which he captured in 1638, and Turan, which he conquered in 1646. But in a few years he lost both. The Mughal military, “had become used to life on the plains of India and had forgotten the nature of the hills and ravines of northern Afghanistan.”⁶ India—not Central Asia and not Afghanistan—was now confirmed as the home of the Mughals.

Akbar’s immediate successors, his son and grandson, followed his generally accommodative policies, but his great grandson did not. Reversing many of Akbar’s policies toward Hindus, Aurangzeb (r. 1659–1707) reestablished the *jizya*, increased favoritism toward Muslims in his administration, and waged wars against local Hindu governments. Under Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire reached its zenith—covering most of the subcontinent and including some 200 million people—and began its decline. Fighting continuously throughout the subcontinent, Aurangzeb could no longer keep a firm hand on his administration, and India began to splinter into separate local governments. Symbolic of the disastrous decline, in 1739 Nadir, Shah of Persia, occupied and sacked Delhi itself and carried off the Mughal treasury.

Over the centuries, smaller streams of migrants also arrived in India. The Mughals continued to recruit Central Asian and Persian officials to the upper echelons of their administrative system, perpetuating links between India and its neighbors to the northwest.⁷ European travelers and courtiers also arrived and provided services for the Mughal nobles.

Frenchman Francois Bernier spent twelve years in Delhi as the physician to the Emperor Aurangzeb and traveled widely. Bernier, and others, testified to the cosmopolitanism of the Mughals, and transmitted information about them back to Europe.⁸ Another stream consisted of *siddis*, Africans, mostly from Ethiopia, usually brought as slaves, sometimes migrating as free people. During Mughal times, *siddis* fought in various Indian armies and navies, sometimes as ordinary foot soldiers, occasionally as powerful commanders, sometimes with the Mughals, more often with regional governments, as they had for centuries.⁹

Trade across the northwestern borders continued to flourish and even increase, especially in the 1600s, when India, Persia, and Turan all had powerful rulers who protected their land routes. Indian merchants traded across these borders and even into Muscovite Russia, exporting such products as cotton textiles, indigo, and sugar in exchange for luxury goods such as silk, fruit, nuts, thousands of horses, and gold and silver. The melons, apples, pears, grapes, almonds, pistachios, walnuts, and apricots enhanced the cuisine of Indians in the plains. (On another food front, “The universal habit of eating mutton or goat may have come to India with the arrival of Islam.”¹⁰) The horses provided the mobility and power of the Mughal cavalry.

Under the Mughals, Hindus and Muslims interacted in economics, politics, social life, the arts, and culture. Through migration and conversion, the Muslim population of India grew from about 400,000 in 1200, to 3.2 million in 1400, to 12.8 million in 1535,¹¹ to perhaps 50 million by 1800.¹² Muslim scholars and Sufi religious mystics and saints migrated to India from Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia. Some came in search of government jobs, others for new cultural opportunities, to study, or to spread their own beliefs. Some of the best poets immigrated from Persia. Similarly, imperial court painters, who produced masterpieces in the Persian and Mughal miniature styles, interacted with painters of the Rajput schools in local Hindu courts across north India, resulting in artistic innovations in both.¹³ On the level of mystical belief and experience, an astonishing syncretism emerged between Hindus and Muslims, especially in the poetry of Kabir (1399–1518?) and of Guru Nanak (1469–1538), the originator of the Sikh religion. Mystics in the two communities, Hindu *bhakti* (devotional) worshippers and Muslim Sufis, frequently had warm personal relations and often attracted followers from each others’ communities.¹⁴

One new language—Persian—was introduced into India as the specialized language of government and administration, and another—Urdu—evolved as the popular language of commerce and public discussion. Combining the syntax of Hindi with the script of Arabic and a substantial vocabulary of Persian words, Urdu began as a pidgin language, which enabled Hindus and Muslims to interact. Over time it emerged as one of the major languages of the Islamic world alongside Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

The integration of some Hindu and Muslim lifestyles, especially in north India, symbolized the “composite” nature of Indian society. Nevertheless, two major questions have troubled the historiography of Mughal rule. The first is: to what extent did the Mughals, and the Delhi Sultans before them, desecrate Hindu temples, as militant Hindus have recently claimed? Richard Eaton analyzes this question carefully and concludes that, despite these accusations, in fact only eighty cases of temple destruction have been historically validated across five centuries of Sultanate and Mughal rule. Even these acts can be understood as looting for economic gain, or as political attacks against rebellious Hindu rulers who patronized the temples, rather than as insults to Hinduism. Mughal rulers, even Aurangzeb, normally protected Hindu temples.

They usually acted pragmatically rather than antagonistically in their political policies towards these shrines.¹⁵

The second main question concerns the processes by which Hindus converted to Islam. By the end of the Mughal Empire (1858), about one-fourth of India's population were Muslim, probably the most enduring cross-cultural transformation under Mughal rule. The conventional argument has been that people of the lowest castes converted to Islam as a means of escaping their degraded status in the Hindu social structure. Most of the conversions, however, took place not where Hinduism was strongest, but where it was least well established: in the Punjab, the corridor through which the Mughals arrived in India; and in remote Bengal, where sedentary agriculture was just being introduced and where Hinduism had not taken root. In both these areas, the arrival of Sufi "missionaries," plus state patronage that could reward converts to Islam with land grants, encouraged conversion, especially among people not affiliated to any other major religion. In neither case, however, was the conversion compulsory.¹⁶

EUROPEANS

From Traders by Sea to Rulers over Land

The Mughal Empire confirmed India's international connections inland to Central Asia and to the Islamic world. For this vast, sub-continental peninsula, however, sea connections have always been at least equally important. For thousands of years India's ports were major nodes in the Indian Ocean trade and beyond. During our period, the arrival of Europeans as major participants in that trade changed India no less than had the Mughals. They also changed Europe, especially England.

Centuries before the European arrival, India was already trading westward to Arabia and Africa, and eastward to the Malacca Straits, Indonesia, and China. Its ports served as "hinges," entrepôts for voyagers sailing these long Indian Ocean routes. The seasonal patterns of the monsoon winds, which demanded sailing at particular times, further encouraged sailors to use Indian ports as their layover points. Many of the sailors were Arabs, and after the rise of Islam, in the seventh century C.E., Muslim merchants dominated Indian Ocean trade. The Chinese had also been active in these waters during the Sung Dynasty (960–1279), but Ming Dynasty rulers, after first continuing and supporting such long-distance expeditions, terminated them in the mid-fifteenth century, leaving Indians and Arabs, both mostly Muslims, as the chief merchants of the Indian Ocean, with the Gujaratis of India's northwest coast pre-eminent among them.¹⁷

Both the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire ruled from inland bases and did not concern themselves with oceanic trade. The traders were on their own and the seas remained open to all. When the Europeans arrived, however, they came with substantial backing from their governments, and they attempted to change the rules of the sea.

The Portuguese came first, in 1498, arriving in the person of Vasco da Gama and his ships and men. Previously, Europe had relied on traders from Venice and Genoa to procure the spices of South and Southeast Asia through brokers in the Middle East. Indeed one-fourth of all Asian spice exports already went to Europe, three-fourths to China. With the rise of Ottoman forces in the fourteenth century, however, these routes were difficult to access, and, in any case, Western Europeans on the Atlantic Coast felt that the Italian traders took too much profit. The Portuguese royal family began early in the 1400s to search for their own route to the east around the unexplored coast of Africa.

A small nation of perhaps one million people in 1500, Portugal nevertheless sought two goals not previously attempted. They wanted not merely to sail the seas, but to tax and control them. To this end they es-



The Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama (c. 1469–1524).

National Maritime Museum, London, Greenwich Hospital Collection.

Image source: <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/conMediaFile.1891/Vasco-da-Gama.html>

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established numerous forts along the coast from East Africa to China, including, from west to east: Mozambique (1507), Hormuz (1515), Goa (1510), Malacca (1511), Macao (1557), and Nagasaki (1571). They demanded that all other ships trading in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, and on into the South China Sea, purchase passes from them and drop anchor at the Portuguese centers along their passage. The Portuguese could act so boldly because, first, the land-based empires surrounding the core areas of the Indian Ocean—including the Mughals—did not interfere with them. Second, the Portuguese successfully mounted cannons on their ships, enabling them to destroy any ships that challenged them. Portugal, too, was one of the new "gunpowder empires."¹⁸

The Portuguese simply could not enforce their claims to a monopoly over the entire spice trade in the Indian Ocean; over the import of Arabian horses into western India; and "as Lords of the Sea, to be able to control, direct, and tax all trade in the Indian Ocean."¹⁹ In general, the Portuguese were viewed as pirates—armed with cannon—who inserted themselves into an existing system that continued much as before their arrival. In fact, the Portuguese relied on alliances with Indians so much that, "Indian capital and commercial expertise were the backbone of the Portuguese Empire, even in the sixteenth century."²⁰

Despite their limitations, the Portuguese did make three important contributions to trade. First, they opened up new sea lanes from the Cape of Good Hope to West Africa and Europe. Second, the Portuguese (and the Spanish in East Asia) brought New World agricultural products such as tobacco, maize, potatoes, tomatoes, papayas, pineapples, cashew nuts, and chilies to the eastern hemisphere. "No Indian had ever seen, let alone cooked with a chili before the Portuguese arrived in India at the beginning of the fifteenth century."²¹ These previously unknown products of the "Columbian Exchange" soon transformed Indian cuisine. Finally, the Portuguese, and later the Dutch and the English, brought abundant gold and silver from the New World to pay for their purchases in Asia.

The Portuguese also sought to convert Indians to Roman Catholicism. Until 1540 the pace was slow and erratic. With the arrival in India of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and its Jesuit troops, however, "intolerance became the theme."²² The Portuguese destroyed all of the Hindu temples in Goa, their Indian Ocean capital, and many in

other settlements as well. “Most Hindu ceremonies were forbidden, including marriage and cremation.”²³ In 1560, the Portuguese instituted the Inquisition, and by 1600 two-thirds of the population of the city of Goa were Christians. Many of the newly converted Christians nevertheless remained quite conscious of their caste position in the Hindu hierarchy. It was not unusual for a person to identify himself as a Goan Christian Saraswat Brahmin.²⁴

Portuguese influence in India diminished as that of the Netherlands, England, and France increased. Failing in the competition with their European rivals, and faced with military opposition by regional Indian rulers, the Portuguese turned their attention to their New World holdings in Brazil. By 1739, the Portuguese were a minimal force in India, maintaining a presence only in Goa and in the tiny enclaves of Daman and Diu along the northwestern coast.

Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch, English, and French organized their overseas operations in the form of “chartered companies.” These enterprises were among the world’s first joint stock companies, forerunners of the modern business corporation. “In 1700, the British East India Company employed over 350 people in its head office, more than many modern multinationals.”²⁵ Shares were publicly traded, and the shareowners were subject only to limited liability. While the joint stock companies were founded for trade in many parts of the world, and for the colonization of the New World as well, “the main prizes were to the East.”²⁶

The English East India Company, chartered in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I, was marginally older, but the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), founded in 1602, set the model. The VOC was not only to trade, it also had orders from the Dutch government to “attack the Spanish and Portuguese wherever you find them.”²⁷ Company convoys traveled armed, and they were authorized by their governments to enter into warfare, or negotiations, with overseas groups and governments. The European companies and their nations competed in the Asian trade. The Dutch won first prize, the Spice Islands, which later became modern Indonesia. The English East India Company, defeated militarily by the Dutch further east, concentrated on India as a worthy consolation prize. The French East India Company, founded only in 1664, soon became their principal European rival there. As the Europeans demarcated their separate Asian spheres of influence, India’s historic connection with Southeast Asia diminished.

In 1612, the English Company defeated the Portuguese near Surat, the most active port on India’s western coast, about 500 miles north of Goa. Then in 1615 the Mughal emperor Jahangir granted the British the right to build their own factory at Surat and to travel and trade freely throughout the empire. The Company built additional forts and factories in Madras (1639), Bombay (1668), and Calcutta (1690). The Company also established trading posts in East Asia, including Guangzhou (Canton), China, in 1711, as a base for trade in tea.

Until the early 1700s, Indian merchants continued to trade, even expanding their commerce in the new markets opened by the Europeans.²⁸ Often British and Indian merchants found their interests and participation intertwined:

*Indian merchants were employed as brokers, interpreters, agents, attorneys, writers, money-changers, cashiers, intermediate brokers, and subcontracting merchants. . . . On the whole the association between the Indian merchants and the Company was as amicable as any could be between two parties, each trying to maximize their [sic] profits.*²⁹

In the shipping industry, the distinction between European and Asian was blurred as Indian crews manned some British ships and

some Britishers served on Indian ships. Sometimes ships were jointly owned. Indians often provided the finances.³⁰ In Bombay, in particular, the ship-building industry, including the construction of ships for British traders, was largely in the hands of Parsis, people who had migrated from Persia to India about 1000 CE to escape persecution of their Zoroastrian faith by Muslim rulers. The Parsis, in particular, often entered into partnerships with British businessmen.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, British shipping displaced Indian shipping.

*There can be no doubt that by the turn of the nineteenth century not only was the European ship dominant in the ocean but that the Indian ship had sailed into oblivion . . . In the western Indian Ocean the magnificent Gujarati fleet . . . gradually dwindled into insignificance, while in the eastern ocean the Calcutta fleet of the private British merchant won the supremacy of the ocean.*³¹

British ships were now larger and more seaworthy crafts, backed by more capital. Also, as Mughal rule began to dissolve, the economy of the hinterland, which previously had supplied Indian shippers, was no longer so secure. Surat, for example, saw its shipping cut to about one-fourth between the late 1600s and the mid-1750s. Most of the city’s traders left for other ports, many of them for Bombay, the new British capital for the west coast.

Over the centuries, the merchandise that was traded changed, transforming the everyday lives of Indians and Europeans. At first both the English and the Dutch sought spices, but by the mid-seventeenth century, cotton textiles were becoming the rage. By 1684, the English were carrying 1.5 million pieces of cotton textiles annually—eighty-three percent of the total value of their trade—and the Dutch carried an additional 300,000 pieces.³² This trade became so vast that by about 1700, nearly ten percent of all the textile workers in Bengal, for example, were producing goods for export.³³ The extensive varieties of Indian cotton cloth, especially, turned the clothing tastes of Britain and northern Europe from wool to cotton. By the mid-1700s, the British were importing raw cotton from India and manufacturing it into cotton textiles in new processes that signaled the birth of the Industrial Revolution, and would substantially displace Indian hand-manufactures with British machine products.

Chinese tea became another transformative substance. Many English ships departing India carried some of the cotton fabrics further east to exchange them for the spices of the Spice Islands and tea from China. Laden with their cargoes of spices and tea from East Asia, they returned to India, boarded additional textiles, and returned to England. The introduction of Chinese tea transformed drinking patterns first in England and then in India. In the nineteenth century, the British realized that India also grew tea leaves in limited quantities, around Assam, and began to develop an Indian plantation tea industry. Chinese silks similarly inspired the development of a thriving silk industry in Bengal.

Because the Indians and the Chinese did not value Europe’s products, the English were forced to pay for Asia’s exports with silver bullion, and some gold, which they earned from their businesses with the Spanish and Portuguese in the New World. England’s mercantilists were disturbed by the outflow and sought some alternative. Through a series of battles and negotiations between 1757 and 1765, the British East India Company became the de facto rulers of large parts of India, especially Bengal. They continued to expand their powers and their landholdings, and by the early nineteenth century they controlled most of India, directly or indirectly. India’s own taxes, now levied by the

British East India Company, paid for British purchases of India's goods. Profits skyrocketed. The British also had Indians grow opium, which the British exported to China to pay for the tea. Chinese objections precipitated the opium war of 1839, which they lost, and the beginning of China's semi-colonization.

Back in England, members of Parliament were shocked by the profits amassed by the officials of the Company, and by some private traders as well, and by the transformation of the trading Company into the rulers of eastern India. The sudden, questionably-accumulated wealth of the "nabobs," and their luxurious life, especially in the British capital city of Calcutta, offended the British at home. Robert Clive, the first Governor of Bengal, was called to account before Parliament and his successor, Warren Hastings, was impeached.³⁴ Although both were officially exonerated, the government of Great Britain decided to transform the Company into a disciplined arm of government through a series of regulating acts culminating in 1858 with the British government disbanding the Company completely and assuming direct rule over India in the name of the Crown.

English rule also drew India into the global wars between France and Britain, fought intermittently from the War of Austrian Succession in 1740–48 until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. The French East India Company had, by 1700, established dozens of factories along India's east and west coasts, competing with the British for trade and political alliances. British victories over the French in India—largely the successes of Robert Clive over Joseph-Francois Dupleix—were an important component of their global victory, and insured that French influence in India would be limited.

The enormous impact of British rule in India—with its educational, administrative, legal, economic, social, and cultural components—falls largely outside the chronological period of this paper. Nevertheless, by the time of the capture of Bengal, the British began to see themselves as rulers of a world-empire. "Rule Britannia," a marker of the new patriotism, was first sung in 1740.³⁵ This unofficial national anthem proclaimed proudly and arrogantly, "All thine shall be the subject main, And every shore it circles thine." Indian adventures were transforming the clothing the Britons wore, the foods they ate, the beverages they drank, their leisure pastimes, and, now, their political and international self-image, as well.

We know much less about Indian images of the Europeans. Although some accounts represent them as untrustworthy, their military alliances were valued. So were the novelties they introduced, including: clocks, measuring devices, telescopes, tobacco, exotic birds, and new musical instruments.³⁶ In general, however, "we must wait for 1750 before the first Indo-Persian eyewitness accounts of Europe begin to make an appearance."³⁷ Even Indians visiting and living in seventeenth century England left few written records of their impressions.³⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of the Mughal Empire and the advent of Europeans, particularly the English, intertwined India's history with larger, historical movements sweeping the world. The Mughals connected India to Persia and Central Asia through massive movements of people and goods, and most of all by precipitating new encounters and accommodations between Muslims and Hindus. At about the same time, Europeans were establishing trading posts and forts throughout the Indian Ocean basin, challenging the Arab and Indian merchants who dominated these trade routes. As time went on, the Europeans entered aggressively into the politics of the region, leading eventually to their colonial rule over the subcontinent. As a result of these India projects,



Robert Clive.

Image source: <http://www.sevenyearswarassociation.com/Reference/SYWChron1757.html>

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life in England was also transformed, in everyday matters like food and clothing, an incipient industrial revolution, increasing global competition with European rivals, and a new self-aggrandizing image as rulers of a global empire. ■

NOTES

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