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## Caste System in Barak Valley : A Brief Study in the Light of Islam

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### ABSTRACT

The caste system is a sore place and a major concern in Indian society, particularly in the North East. And Barak Valley is in Assam's southern region, often known as southern Assam. It gives me a sinking sensation to say that people in India are still chasing after the caste system. This caste system is now regarded part of religion, and it has extended not only inside Hindu society, but also among Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Jainists. And because of its rigid regulations, this infamous caste system has led in and continues to result in a slew of atrocities. It would never be overdone to say that the caste system has become one of the most significant hurdles to society's growth, because people are bound to their own castes and are unable to express their creative and distinct ideas and ways of thinking. However, Islam promotes a peaceful society in which there are no conflicts based on caste, color, or religion, because Islam promotes equality and peace. So, this study is an analytical approach that deals with the aforementioned prevailing issue, with a special focus on Barak Valley, and securitizes this terrible system in light of what Islam teaches about it. Secondary sources have also been extensively explored to assess the problem.

Keywords: Caste System, Barak valley, Theories, Islam, Characteristics, Socio-economic.

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### Introduction

People fall into a variety of social categories, which can be earned, inherited, or determined by occupation and gender. And the effects of these categories can be seen not just in the dynamics of social relationships, but also in how social status is represented. As previously stated, the state of Assam's south is known as Barak Valley. Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi are the three districts that make up Barak Valley. The last two districts have a Muslim majority, while the first has a Muslim population of 48 percent. Islam and Muslim life have a long history in the region. The official language of the valley is Bengali, however the bulk of the population speaks Sylheti, a Bengali dialect. In these three districts, the caste system is at an all-time high. Except for a handful, the people of Valley have a strong belief in the caste system. The society is separated into rigid compartments, with those from higher castes exploiting those from lower castes in both direct and indirect ways. Due to the caste system's constraints, a person born into one caste was bound to remain in that caste for the rest of his or her life. In Muslim society, the 'Gulam' and 'Napith' castes are treated as if they are animals, with upper-class people like 'Choudhury' and 'Barbhuiya' looking down on them as if they have no value or respect, whereas in Hindu society, the Shudras and Dalits are untouchables and must perform all menial tasks. They are unable to do anything to improve their situation since they are being dragged down. And because people are confined to their own castes and are not expressing their innovative and various ideas and ways of thinking, these foundations and shackles of the Caste system might be considered fundamental hurdles to society's progress. As a result, their thinking became constrained and confined. Separatism and the danger of going astray occurred as a result of this. People in Barak Valley still define themselves by the caste they belong to and the social group in which they find themselves. As previously stated, Islam promotes a peaceful society in which there are no conflicts based on caste, color, or religion since Islam promotes equality and peace. Islam is an egalitarian religion, meaning it does not believe in discrimination based on nationality, family, caste, creed, race, or other factors.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The main purpose the study is to scrutinize prevailing caste system in Barak Valley, Assam in the light of Islam. And how it influences individual and social life of people?

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### Methodology

This study is primarily based on the relevant published materials like books, journals, magazines etc. Secondary sources are collected from the field study by interviewing the people of the community from the different parts of the region.

### *Origin of Caste System*

There are numerous hypotheses on the origins of the caste system in Barak Valley and India. Others are biological, while others are religious. However, just one religious and one biological theory are mentioned in this article.

#### *Religious Theory*

In terms of religious theories, it appears that religious theories explain how, according to the Rig Veda, the primal man killed himself in order to form a human civilization, and the various portions of his body created the four separate varnas. Brahmins came from his head, Kshatriyas came from his hands, Vaishyas came from his thighs, and Shudras came from his feet. The declining order of the many organs from which the Varnas were generated determines the Varna hierarchy (Daniel). Brahmins, for example, who are descended from Purush's head, are regarded the most knowledgeable and powerful varna due to their learning and education, and are a symbol of the brain. Kshatriyas, often known as the warrior caste, were created by arms, which symbolize power.

#### *Biological Theory*

According to biological theory, all existing things inherit one of three types of traits. Varna signifies mental temper and refers to various hues of texture or color. According to this idea, the Sattva traits are frequently passed down through the generations of Brahmins. They have a calm and self-controlling demeanor, as well as an austere aspect. They are regarded as having purity, uprightness, and patience. Brahmins have a strong desire to gain knowledge, wisdom, and faith. The Raja traits are passed down to the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, whereas the Tama qualities are passed down to the Shudras (Daniel). One's Varna is defined by the nature of one's activities, the quality of one's ego, the color of one's knowledge, the texture of one's understanding, the temper of one's fortitude, and the brilliance of one's bliss.

However, the caste system is thought to have begun with the arrival of the Aryans in India approximately 1500 BC (Daniel). The Aryans had a social organizing theory known as Varna Vyavastha, which was based on society's four hierarchical divisions of function. Religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions were listed in order of diminishing significance (Velassery, 2). The Aryans were divided into three categories. The first category, the Rajayanas (later altered to Kshatriyas), were warriors, followed by the Brahmins, who were priests (Daniel). These two tribes fought for political supremacy among the Aryans on a regular basis. The Brahmins eventually rose to prominence as the Aryan society's leaders. The Vaishyas were the final group, which consisted of farmers and craftspeople (Daniel). The indigenous were enslaved and made servants by the Aryan invaders. The Vaishyas became the society's landlords and businesspeople, while the locals became peasants and craftspeople as a result of this development (Daniel).

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### **Characteristic Features of Caste System**

Because of its distinguishing characteristics, the caste system has a variety of implications. As we know, caste refers to socially distinct endogamous groups that are simultaneously separated and connected through three basic characteristics: separation regarding marriage and contact, division of labor in each group; which represents a specific profession, and finally, hierarchy. However, as circumstances have changed, caste has adapted to diverse characteristics such as a less rigid structure, a relationship to political power, and variance in segmental division. Here are all of the Caste System's distinguishing qualities, as shown in numerous changing patterns: -

- A. Ascriptiveness-** The caste of a person was defined by birth. For "violation of caste rules," caste membership could be revoked by other caste members. Marriage was likewise limited to caste-related unions.
- B. Endogamy-** Endogamy refers to marriage inside a group. It solely shows the marriage patterns of caste members inside their own caste. Within the caste system, inter-caste marriage is prohibited.
- C. Social Classification-** Indian society is socially stratified into numerous classes, most of which are based on caste. There are different castes, each of which has a well-developed living pattern based on their caste.
- D. Hierarchy-** It simply refers to the pattern of people's ranking within society based on their caste statuses, which are established by conceptions of purity and impurity within occupations, and are rated from higher to lower places. It denotes or depicts a caste ranking system in which the pure caste is at the top and the impure caste is at the bottom. For example, because Brahmins perform rituals and other religious practices in addition to teaching, their occupation is considered to be of the purest form; thus, they are placed at the top of the hierarchical system, whereas Sweeper, whose occupation consists of cleaning and scavenging, is placed at the bottom due to impure occupation.
- E. Commensality-** Members of different castes were not allowed to eat or drink with each other. Accepting food and drink acquired a pure/impure caste value dependent on the person's caste within the hierarchical structure. A caste's commensality restrictions were usually a good indicator of where they were in the social hierarchy.
- F. Socio-Economic Interdependence or Association-** Each caste has a traditional occupation associated with it that they are unable to shift over time. As a result, each caste must rely on a variety of other castes for existence, as each caste is only linked with one or two jobs, yet they require a variety of other products and services, which they can only obtain by interacting with other castes. For example, Baniyas work in commerce and occasionally (at marriages, births, and other events) must execute rites that they can only do by interacting with Brahmins, who have skill in priesthood, ritual performance, and instruction.
- G. Purity and Impurity-** One of the most significant aspects of the caste system is cleanliness and impurity. As endogamous groups or castes, they are rated according to their ceremonial purity and contamination based on their deeds, occupations, languages, dress styles, and food habits. For example, drinking alcoholic beverages, eating non-vegetarian cuisine, eating high-caste food leftovers, and working in jobs such as lifting dead animals,

sweeping, and transporting waste are all deemed filthy.

**H. Distinction in Customs-** Because each caste has its own set of customs, language or speech, and dress code or pattern, each caste has its own way of life. The high caste speaks a pure language, whereas the low caste speaks a dialect.

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### Caste System in Barak Valley

However, as previously said, the caste system is inextricably linked to Hindu philosophy, religion, custom, and tradition. It is thought to have been created and sanctioned by God. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras were the four primary varnas in Hindu society, according to this ideology. During the Vedic period, the Varna system was primarily centered on division of labor and occupation. There were just three varnas until the Shudras were established, and occupational distinction was not strictly enforced. A fifth category, known as Avarna or outcaste or untouchable, exists outside of the Varna system. Caste is an endogamous group with a culture and structural life that is generally independent. The Varna system gave birth to the caste system. Any attempt to define caste, according to Ghurye, is certain to fail due to the phenomenon's intricacy. According to Risley, a caste is a collection of families with a shared name who claim a common ancestor and claim to pursue the same hereditary vocation, and who are viewed as comprising a single homogenous society by those who are competent to provide an opinion. According to MacIver and Page, when men's status is completely set, and they have no prospect of changing it, the class takes on the ultimate form of caste. We can name a class caste, according to Cooley, when it is rather firmly hereditary. Caste, according to M.N Srinivas, is a segmented structure. Every caste, according to him, is divided into sub castes, which are endogamy units whose members share a common employment, social and ceremonial life, and culture, and are governed by the same authoritative body, the panchayat. According to Bailey, two ideas of segregation and hierarchy are used to bring caste groups together into a system. Dumont views caste as a distinct type of inequality rather than a form of stratification. The hierarchy, separation, and division of labor are the three main characteristics of caste. Weber views caste as a means of enhancing and transforming social distance into a religious or strictly magical principle. Caste hierarchy, according to Adrian Mayer, is controlled by more than simply economic and political considerations, but these are crucial.

The presence of multiple status groupings among Muslims in Assam's Barak Valley has allegedly been a topic of debate among academics. 'Bengali Muslims of the Barak Valley are separated into distinct groupings, status-groups or castes, and economic levels,' according to the report. Syed, Choudhury, Talukdar, Mazumder, Mazumder, Laskar, Barbhuiya, and Mazarbhuiya inhabited the higher status, with Sayed at the top. The Choudhuries take the next spot because of their purported blood purity and economic dominance derived from land ownership. The Mazumdars, Talukdars, Laskars, and Bhuiyas, who claim to have formerly been Zamindars or big-landlords, share the second position in the hierarchy with the Choudhuries. Inter-marriages between these communities are not frowned upon. Muslim fisherman are one of the occupational groups that exist in Bangladesh's Barak Valley region and Sylhet district. In fact, before converting to Islam, Mahimal was the most disadvantaged group in society, as untouchables and outcastes. Because of its egalitarian attitude, Hazrat Shah Jalal's traditional invent of Sylhet in 1328 A D brought the oppressed groups into the fold of Islam.

Following the new socio-political movements, a huge number of fishermen converted to Islam in the belief that the new faith would provide them with social justice, forming the modern-day "Mahimal" community.

Mahimals, despite their deep ties to their traditional occupation, have remained isolated in comparison to other high-ranking clans. Their profession is fully reliant on nature, namely fishing, which takes place primarily during the summer months when rivers are brimming with water. In fact, the majority of them are marginal fisherman who fish for a living. They are jobless during particular seasons and must rely on other professions for a living, such as agriculture labor, wage labor, carpentry, and so on. Some Mahimals, on the other hand, have been involved in commercial fish farming and fish commerce. They rent beels, fisheries, and khaals from landlords or the Assam government's fishery department for profit-making fishing. These Mahimals are generally absentee fishermen who are not directly involved in fishing. There are only a few government or private personnel among them who have noticed the community's terrible educational situation. In the Muslim society of Cachar Mahimal, Napitand other low occupational groups have been isolated and looked down upon by the upper groups in terms of social interaction. As a result, it has been discovered that the distinction is mostly between superior groups such as Mazumder, Laskar, and Barbhuiya, and occupational groups such as Mahimal and Napith. The Muslim caste of Napith (barber) is still linked to the old occupation. They also execute 'circumcision' (the removal of the foreskin from the human penis) of Muslim youths in the community, which is a special chore. Circumcision is, in reality, an obligatory procedure in the life of a Muslim man. They conduct subsistence farming in the agricultural area as tenants of land owners as well as Gulam, in addition to these traditional occupations.

The different castes and groups that exist in Hinduism, such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, can be seen in the same way.

The Brahmanas, who are seers, scientists, teachers, politicians, and others, make up the upper class. The Kshatriyas, who are society's defendants in the shape of soldiers, police officers, and guards, are next in line. The Vaishyas, or producers, are those below them, such as farmers, agricultural and industrial workers. Sudras, or the lowest in the social hierarchy, are service providers such as tailors, blacksmiths, cobblers, and carpenters. Sudras, or the lowest in the social hierarchy, are service providers such as tailors, blacksmiths, cobblers, and carpenters. Sudras are considered "untouchables" by the upper castes. To the higher two classes, the Vaishyas are likewise "untouchables." There is also considerable discrimination towards Kshatriyas by Brahmins. Shudras are divided into various sub-castes, each of which faces significant discrimination. All of these castes can be found in Barak Valley and other parts of India under various names.

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### Status Lower Castes in Barak Valley

In the Barak Valley's regional Muslim society, Mahimals, Gulams, Shudras, Napiths, and other lower castes maintain a marginal position. Traditional occupation, lack of cultivable land, and separation continue to make Mahimal and Napith, Dalits, and shudras the most vulnerable groups today. When compared to prestige groups like as Mazumder, Laskar, and Barbhuiya, Sayyad, Chaudhury, and Brahmins, they are regarded inferior or low in the social order. Indirectly, they are disliked in social interactions and gatherings in the hamlet. However, it does not imply that Muslims practice untouchability. High-ranking tribes carefully adhere to endogamy, never establishing marriage relationships with Mahimals, Napiths, Gulams, Shudras,

and others. According to a previous president of the 'Barak Valley Mahimal Federation,' Mahimals do not have equal status in Muslim culture due to a caste-like stratification that exists. In comparison to high-ranking groups, their educational and economic conditions are extremely bad. He cites a lack of information about education and current occupations, a lack of desire in educating the child, low income, and the social milieu as factors for this situation. The problem of lower caste underdevelopment is two-fold: one is their unconsciousness of their terrible living conditions, and the other is a lack of facilities and assistance for socioeconomic development. If they do not go forward to improve their situation internally, there is a slim likelihood that program and policy will be able to help them.

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### Impacts of Caste System and Its Demerits

Humans like to live in a peaceful society where there is no inequity, hatred, conflict, or prejudice based on any social bad structure, such as caste or customs. However, it is reprehensible to state that the caste system still exists in today's world, and that it serves as a barrier or wall in different fields or facets of human life. In Barak Valley and other parts of India, there are several drawbacks to the caste system.

It would never be elongation to say that the Caste System opposes mobility of labor because it denies mobility of labor. Individuals who are subject to the Caste System are unable to pursue any vocation of their choosing. However, an individual is obligated to pursue the occupation dictated by the Caste System. As a result, many people bear the burden of failure and live their lives in misery because they are unable to succeed in their chosen profession. As a result, individuals engage in idleness. And the caste system encourages people to be untouchable. Without a doubt, the caste system has generated an odious societal evil known as untouchability. Members of the untouchable caste stay at the bottom of the social order, oppressed and depressed, as a result of caste stratification. "Untouchability is the hateful expression of Caste System and it is a crime against God and Man," says Mahatma Gandhi, the nation's father. All social, religious, economic, cultural, and political rights and benefits are denied to the untouchables who remain under the control of the Caste System. This awful structure stifles social unity, which is just another flaw in the caste system. He places limitations on food, drink, intercourse, occupation, and mate selection, sabotaging social unity, integrity, and brotherly feelings. Between the upper and lower castes, feelings such as wrath, jealousy, and envy exist. In addition, the caste system obstructs the country's togetherness. Lower caste persons in society are unable to express their unhappiness since they are denied all of society's privileges. As a result, social unity has been shattered. In a single line, the caste system produces an unfavorable environment for the development of national unity. Another disadvantage of the caste system is that it presents impediments to the country's social and economic development. Because they believe in the principle of karma, members of the caste increasingly become more conservative. Conservatism causes them to neither abandon ancient habits and traditions nor readily adopt new concepts, values, or scientific discoveries. As a result, hurdles to societal advancement are formed. As Barak comes from India, the world's most democratic country, the caste system is unquestionably anti-democratic. And it's a sore place in the world's most democratic country because it undermines the essential concepts of a successful democracy: democracy, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Democracy guarantees equal rights to all people, regardless of caste, religion, or skin color. The Caste System, on the other hand, does not provide equal rights to all members of society. The rights of people in a caste-ridden society are determined by social stratification. For example, whereas members of upper castes enjoy several benefits, members of lower castes are oppressed. As a result, democracy's essential principle has been tainted.

The worst part is that it obstructs the development of one's personality. Human personality development is hampered by the caste system. It's because people are compelled to follow the occupations dictated by the Caste System. Individuals are unable to accept any occupation of their choosing. However, the Caste System does not assign occupations based on an individual's efficiency. For example, even if a Shudra has the necessary combat ability and efficiency, he cannot fight with the Kshatriyas. As a result, many gifted individuals are unable to develop their personalities while living in the shadow of the caste system. The caste system has a major flaw: social inequity. As a result of social stratification, each caste is distinct from the others, resulting in social inequity. As a result, in the social, economic, religious, and political sectors, a perception of superiority and inferiority is established. The distribution of many important items in society is also based on social superiority and inferiority. Members of the higher castes eventually grow wealthy, enjoying a variety of benefits, while members of the lower castes gradually become destitute, losing all benefits. As a result, the Caste System generates a backward class that is reliant on the wealthy and lives a life akin to that of domestic animals. In a male-dominated society, the caste system is also an impediment to women's freedom. Women's lives are made extremely difficult by this system. It's because the caste system denies women their right to an education. Living behind the four walls of conservatism is a torturous existence for women. The caste system promotes child marriage and forbids widows from remarrying. As a result, it condemns them to a life of torment. Last but not least, the caste system causes a slew of societal issues and fragments society. These issues include underage marriage, dowry customs, casteism, poverty, suicide, and family disorganization, among others. These issues will not be solved in India unless the caste system is abolished.

All of the disadvantages of the caste system are clearly visible in Barak Valley, and a vast number of people are enslaved by it. As a result of social stratification, each caste is distinct from the others, resulting in social inequity. As a result, in the social, economic, religious, and political sectors, a perception of superiority and inferiority is established. The distribution of many important items in society is also based on social superiority and inferiority.

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### Caste System and Islam

After reading and understanding caste system and its impacts on individuals and society in Barak Valley, it can be said that this evil system makes a barrier towards the development of society. And this evil system has become the cause of unrest in the minds and souls of human beings. As mentioned above that a result of this system, every caste differs from each other and thereby creates social inequality in the society. Therefore, a sense of superiorities and inferiority is created in social, economic, religious and political spheres. The distribution of various essential commodities is also on the basis of superiority and inferiority in the society. And Islam is the complete system of life because it shows the light in the all aspects of life whether it is individual or social life. Islam declares a complete equality among all mankind, regardless of one's faith, skin colour, language, gender or ethnic background. The whole universe is

dominion of almighty God and all the people is his creatures. Everyone is born equal and will die equal. He will judge every person on the basis of merits and deeds. So, there is no caste system in Islam. Islam is an egalitarian religion, which means that it doesn't believe in discrimination based on nation, family, caste, creed, race, etc. The castes which exist among Muslims have no relation with Islam because Islam talks and provide rights whereas caste system snatches human rights. So, it would be meaningless if one says the caste system exists in Islam. And it can be seen in the Quran and sunnah that how Islam rejects this evil system.

In the Quran, Chapter 49, Verse 13, it reads, *"O mankind we have created you from one male and female and made you into nations and the tribes that you may know one another. Surely the most honourable among you with Allah is the one who is the most righteous. Verily Allah is all-knowing all aware."*

Prophet Muhammad stated in his farewell sermon, *"O people. Your Lord is one and your father is one. (Adam) An Arab has no superiority over non-Arab, nor a non-Arab has any superiority over Arab, also white has no superiority over black nor does black have any superiority over white, except by piety and righteousness. All humans are from Adam and Adam is from dust."*

The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is said to have declared: *"There are two things which can lead people to infidelity and disbelief, one is weeping loudly on the dead body and another one is to consider others as low on the basis of their birth (caste)."*

In another popular incident, the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, ordered Bilal Habshi RZ (an African slave from Ethiopia) to perform the azaan (call to prayer), from the roof of the Kaaba. Prophet Muhammad condemned those who practiced caste-discrimination i.e., ill-treating someone based on their birth.

Those who discriminate people the basis of caste, creed or something else they are doing as Satan did, and it was mentioned clearly in the Quran that the founder of casteism is Satan, also known as Iblis or Azazel because he started it first. When Allah ordered the angels and jinn (genies) to bow down in front of Adam, peace be upon him, the angels obeyed him, but Iblis refused to do so. When Allah asked him why he refused, he replied asserting his creation (caste) superiority. The holy "Qur'an" says that Allah questioned him: *"What prevented you (O Iblis) that you did not prostrate when I commanded you?"*

Iblis responded: *"I am better than him (Adam), you created me from fire, and him you created from clay [i.e., earth]."*

The nature of fire is to go up and the nature of clay is to go down. This was the argument of Satan. Allah didn't like his caste-based argument and banished him from paradise. Allah said: *"(O Iblis) get down from this (paradise), it is not for you to be arrogant here. Get out, for you are of those humiliated and disgraced."*

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## Conclusion

In the history of human beings, it can be seen that discrimination has long been a cause of injustice. Islam stands against the discrimination, insanity, brutality, calamity on basis of religious, caste, language, creed and colour. It regards human beings as equal children of Adam. As a religion, Islam does not recognize the racial discrimination among people. All are considered equal in receiving human rights and in discharge duties. According to Islamic teaching, no privileged or chosen class exists except those having piety or moral excellence. A Quranic injunction forbids the Muslims to underestimate others. Assuming that there will be natural differences in social status and income among individuals which is the natural outcome due to the differences in personal talents and efforts, a sense of brotherhood towards fellow Muslims and a general sense of humanity towards every human being have been suggested to be cultured to further establish equality in society. As mentioned above that there is no bar for caste system in Islam so, those Muslims who believe and practice caste system in their daily life, they practice against the core teachings of Islam. Islam emphasizes greater social equality among all its believers. It was therefore strongly opposed to any form of discrimination on the basis of employment, nationality, colour, or class. The Holy Qur'an declares that the human race was created by one man and one woman so that the diversity of the different races and peoples for the purpose of identification, the Most Honourable of the Almighty would be a sincere believer. Prophet Muhammad said that weeping loudly in front of a corpse and insulting a person because of his birth leads people to disloyalty. In Hujjat-ul-weda, he stated that he had declared that no Arab was better than a non-Arab, that no one was more Arab than Arabs, that no white was better than black, no black was better than white men. The only way to qualify was to worship God. Islam therefore condemned any form of discrimination on the basis of race, colour, nationality or occupation and declared it haram (forbidden) and imposed an equal social order. The social principle of equality was firmly established during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. As mentioned above that this evil system is a barrier towards the development of society and human beings. So, the caste system which is prevailing in Barak Valley amongst people should be eradicated from the society because equality and equal opportunity is the core teaching of every single religion.

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