

DEVELOPMENT  
OF  
ADMINISTRATION  
IN ASSAM

*With Special Reference to Land Revenue  
Justice and Police 1874-1920*

M. L. BOSE

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*The Development of Administration in Assam* between 1874-1920 is a significant study in the growth of government in the smallest north-eastern state of India. This province was tagged along with the Bengal Government in 1826 after the first Anglo-Burmese War ; it contained in its territory the present constituents of the North Eastern Council barring Tripura. The province was the habitat of many colourful but most primitive tribes around highly developed populations on the two river valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak. Though the people in the valleys were culturally more advanced than those on the surrounding hills they belonged to distinct linguistic communities, tribes and sub-tribes which numbered not less than a thousand and spoke separate dialects. The topography and climatic conditions varied as much as did the kaleidoscopic tribes. It presented a microscopic view of the Indian civilisation the most distinctive feature of which is unity in variety.

The problem of administration of such a remote and heterogeneous population spread over inaccessible hills untrudged by educated people tribes who did not know what government was in modern political society, can be easily understood by students of political science. The British conquered without any knowledge of the territory and the people grappled with the problem of administration over almost a hundred years and beginning with a rough and ready Non-regulation system gradually brought the people under their government and made them know what was administration and law in the modern world.

The impact of government on the people is outside the scope of this work. But it shows the introduction of British administration over the entire length and breadth of the province. In 1920 the province was made fit for an advanced type of Regulation Government. The Chelmsford Reforms Committee recommended the formation of Governor's province in this North Eastern part of the Indian Empire.

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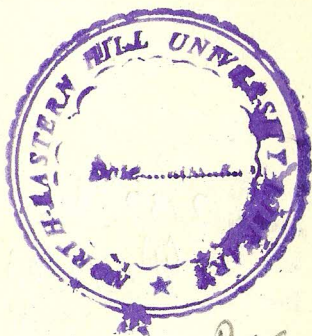
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An ardent follower of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother Dr. Bose is a social scientist who has a keen grasp over economic history and social transformation in the post independence era. His research scholars are working on various problems of social and political change in North East India.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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- RAA** : Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam.
- RAEBA** : Report on the Administration of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
- RAR** : Report on the Administration of Revenue in Assam.
- RAREBA** : Report on the Administration of Revenue in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
- RAJ** : Report on the Administration of Justice in Assam.
- RAJEBA** : Report on the Administration of Justice in the Province of East Bengal and Assam.
- RAP** : Report on the Administration of Police in Assam.
- REJEBA** : Report on the Administration of Justice in the Province of East Bengal and Assam.
- RAPEBA** : Report on the Administration of Police in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
- ROARA** : Resolution on the Administration of Revenue in Assam.
- ROAPA** : Resolution on the Administration of Police in Assam.
- ROAJA** : Resolution on the Administration of Justice in Assam.
- PGAGD** : Proceedings of the Government of Assam in General Department.
- PGAJD** : Proceedings of the Government of Assam in Judicial Department.
- PGARD** : Proceedings of the Government of Assam in Revenue Department.

- PGFIN : Proceedings of the Government of Assam in Finance Department.
- PGA : Proceedings of the Government of Assam.
- PGIHPUB : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Public Department.
- PGIHPOL : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Political Department.
- PGIHREV : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Revenue Department.
- PGIHJUD : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Judicial Department.
- PGIFOPOL : Proceedings of the Government of India in Foreign Political Department.
- PGIHEST : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Establishment Department.
- PGIHPD : Proceedings of the Government of India in Home Police Department.

## GLOSSARY

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- Bar Barua** : One of the five higher officers selected from noble families and next in rank to the three great counsellors of the Ahom Kings.
- Bar Phukan** : Ibid.
- Bar-Panchayat** : Higher village Council.
- Choudhury** : Revenue Official. In Lower Assam Revenue Collector was known as Choudhury.
- Dulloi** : Village Headman of Khasi Hills.
- Gaobura** : Village Elder of the Assam Valley.
- Ganak** : Astrologer.
- Got** : Unit of four Pykes. From the beginning of Ahom rule four Pykes were formed into a Got to serve the State; from the time of Rudra Singha three people formed a Got.
- Kakoti** : Clerks of the Ahom Kings.
- Khel** : A division of people made by the Ahom Kings for specific purposes. Some Khels were vocational. For example, blacksmiths or potters were divided into groups known as Khels and thus there was one Khel for blacksmiths, another for goldsmiths and so on. There were some territorial Khels as well.\*
- Lal** : Headman of the village in Mizo Hills.
- Lambardar** : The man responsible for local affairs in Naga village.

\*Ibid., p. 26.

- Laskar : Village Chief in Garo Hills was called Laskar.
- Me : Village Council in Mikir Hills.
- Mel : Council of village Elders or of Royal Officers or Council of the noble of the Ahom community. Usually disputes of local nature were settled by a meeting of village Elders which was known as Mel; the King sometimes consulted important issues in meeting of important officers which was called Mel; and again some relations of Kings had their Councils which also was known as Mel.\*
- Mouza : Revenue Sub-division.
- Mouzadar : Revenue Collector of a few villages within a Mouza.
- Pyaya Sodha Pukhan : Officer-in-Charge of Justice. Created during the reign of Rudra Singha, the officer was the sovereign's deputy to hear appeal from Barbarua or Barphukan.
- Pyke : Subject. Each man subjected to personal service in lieu of tax for enjoying land of the sovereign was called Pyke.
- Panchayats : Village Council to adjudicate petty disputes of locality.
- Rajkhowa : Provincial Governor during the Ahom rule was designated Rajkhowa.
- Sadiya Khowa : Governor of Sadiya.
- Gohain
- Siem : Hereditary chiefs of Khasi estate.

\*Please see for details—*A Hundred Years of Local Self-Government in Assam*, pp. 23-25.

## INTRODUCTION

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THE STATE functions through the agency of government. The various departments of the government employ public officials who by law are given the authority of service to the governed and the power to enforce obligations on them. A very considerable portion of the state's wealth is created by the organs of the government and departments are, by their activities, to maintain law and order, increase national wealth and promote national welfare. Administrative history, therefore, is an account of the functions of the various departments of government.

Today, government is no longer confined to police functions. It has a positive part to play in the national life. An elaborate administrative structure has been constructed for this purpose. It defends national existence. It controls the immigration and trade. It attempts to raise the standard of living of all. It assists the poor, the wretched and the sick. It regulates the hours of work. It eliminates dangers and fatigues of labour. It arrests economic depression and mass unemployment. It conserves natural resources. It establishes certain basic standards of morality. It provides amenities and facilities like public administration, art collection, libraries, the encouragement and protection of inventions for the complete development of man. "Government in the twentieth century to a considerable extent expresses the moral sentiment of the community, the responsibility of man to God and the Universe as the Churches did more substantially in the past".<sup>1</sup> Hence the importance of the administration.

A study of administrative history serves a variety of purposes. Administration is a great industry in a sense it spends a vast amount of money and employs millions of persons. It affects all aspects of the life of man. A second reason is its

1. H. Finer: *Major Governments of Modern Europe*, p. 6.

value as a form of training in the art of observing and evaluating social facts, weighing arguments and detecting flaws in them, forming intelligent public opinion on public questions and doing various other things which every citizen in democracy is supposed to do. Two and two do not always make four in politics. Sometimes 000 is three in politics. The art of understanding political problems has to be acquired by a study of administrative history and observation of acts of government. Every student of history has noted the regularity with which radicalism and reaction in the government have followed each other throughout the ages. There is a third reason for its study. It is to be found in relation to patriotism. The state demands obedience yet there can be no obedience unless people know what they are to obey. One must learn wherefrom the various institutions and concepts come and one must see what the government is doing at a moment and what course it might take. In part it is a matter of historical fact and partly it is a matter of interpretation. An intelligent being therefore discerns weak spots of the administration.

While approaching the subject we must get rid of the notion that the administration is a simple affair easy to understand without a concentrated effort. It is, in fact, anything but simple. Information that can be had is fragmentary and not often accurate and always tinged with partisanism and more so if the administration is controlled by an alien country. There is a vast body of material in the form of proceedings of the various branches of the government, administration reports, contemporary observations in various works of a secondary nature. It is humanly impossible to go through the details of all these papers. There is only one way by which the study can be made meaningful. It is by glossing over everything that is not relevant and of vital value to the study.

*The Development of Administration in Assam 1874-1920* is altogether a new work in the sense that the present work is the first attempt to bring the different aspects of the provincial administration of this province in the campus of a book. So far no scholar has worked on this subject. But this does not mean that no attempt was made in this direction. The Government of Assam published a pamphlet "An Account of Assam and its Administration" in 1903. But not a single copy is available at present.

The only source of information regarding Assam's administration is the *Imperial Gazetteer* Volume VI, published in 1905. Since then many developments had taken place in Assam. Some specialised works on different aspects of administration or government have come out. An attempt is made to construct a coherent account of these developments up to 1920.

The scheme of the work is as follows. The first chapter gives a history of the province up to the coming of the British in Assam, then how gradually the British formed it into an unit of administration separating it from the Bengal Presidency, the experiment to amalgamate Assam with Eastern Bengal and finally the restoration of the local administration and its ultimate recognition as a province of British India in 1921. The second chapter traces the history of formation of the modern province of Assam that is, administrative divisions and sub-divisions of area. The third chapter deals with the administration of Assam and the Assam Commission. The fourth chapter traces the development of the office of the Chief Commissioner. The fifth deals with revenue administration. The sixth shows the development of the system of judicial procedure, both civil and criminal. The seventh studies the evolution of the administration of police. The last chapter summarises the conclusions arrived at in the previous chapters.

In the preparation of the work a number of obligations were incurred. My first gratitude goes to Dr. N.K. Bose, M.A. D. Phil, Ex-Principal, D.H.S.K. Commerce College, Dibrugarh for encouraging me to do research. Then I express my gratitude to the Ex-Rector Mr. L.P. Dutt, Dibrugarh University, who was generous enough to take me to Gauhati for introducing me to Dr. V. Venkata Rao. I am grateful to Dr. V. Venkata Rao for encouraging me.

I must also acknowledge my debt to Mr. P.C. Sharma, Retired Keeper of Records, Assam Secretariat, Shillong for permitting me to collect materials in his custody. My thanks are also due to Mr. S. Roy, Director of the National Archives and Mr. P.C. Chakravarty, the Librarian of West Bengal Secretariat Library for permitting me to consult relevant papers and books under their custody and Mr. B. Dutta Ray and his magnanimous wife for their generous hospitality during my study in Shillong.

## CONCLUSION

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THE history of the Development of Administration of Assam is not only fascinating but also instructive. The East India Company was formed in 1600 to trade and commerce with the India which was a land of fabulous wealth. Instead of concerning themselves with commercial articles in course of their trade and commerce, disintegrating political condition encouraged the Company to take up the trade in arms and warfare which was much more paying than the legitimate profits of trade. In course of their participation in the indigenous warfare they were further lured by the prospect of founding an Empire in India. In course of time they succeeded in establishing it. But the essential motive behind the Indian empire was to exploit the resources of India, as neither climate, nor the people or its culture had any attraction to the British adventures who understood very little of them. As the Empire became a reality the administration of the country was geared up to facilitate the systematic exploitation for as long a time as it could be.

The British penetration into Assam began at a time when unfortunately the kingdom of the Ahoms reached the nadir of its decadence and no longer capable of restoring peace and order in the Kingdom. The outlying provincial administrators ceased to obey the commands of their royal master. The Burmese took advantage of internal feuds and tried to establish their hegemony over their Mongoloid neighbour. The British were busy in suppressing the Marathas and the predatory hoards which were still powerful. But as soon as they settled

their accounts with them, they came to secure the North East Frontier as Bengal was the nerve centre of the English Empire in India.

The British relations with Assam had long before begun and they had already collected valuable information regarding the province much ahead of actual operations. They had once helped the Ahom Prince to suppress rebellion at a critical time in 1793-94. The outbreak of the Ahom-Burmese hostilities provided an opportunity to annex Assam thus pushing the North East Frontier to their natural boundaries.

The Ahom prince had sought the British help to push back the Tibeto-Burmans. But at the end of hostilities the British occupied Assam, and held it. The Central Administration of the Company did not like to assume the entire territory under its immediate management as they were not sure of its outcome. Only on an experimental basis Lower Assam was added to the charge of Mr. David Scott who had an intimate knowledge of the land from his services in the administration of the North East Frontier of the British India. In the rest the indigenous princes and their system of administration were maintained.

First Lower Assam up to Bisvanath including the three thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari transferred from Bengal in 1825 were divided into four districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Nowgong and Tezpur in 1832. Next when Upper Assam was annexed in 1838, two districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar were created. Khasi and Jaintia Hills were made a district of Assam Commission. In 1835 Sadiya and in 1842 Matak territories were added to Lakhimpur district. The headquarter was transferred to Dibrugarh in the Matak country. The territories of Govinda Chandra was placed under a British Officer in 1832 after his death and Tularam's territories were added to it in 1853 when he was pensioned off. Garo Hills were separated from Cooch-Bihar and added to the Goalpara district of Assam. In 1869 it was constituted into a separate district. Angami Naga Hills were formed into a district in 1866 and brought under direct administration. In 1875, Lhota Naga territory, 1889 Ao territory and in 1917 Luki tracts were

annexed, to the district, the headquarters of which was transferred to Kohima in 1878. The Chin Lashai Hills of Bengal and Assam were united under single administrative unit in 1898 and placed under Assam Administration which had many other tribal areas of similar nature under its administration. Finally, Sylhet was transferred to Assam to make it a sizeable province and in 1874 the new province came into being.

Thus nearly three quarters of a century was required to consolidate the whole of Assam into a unit of administration. It is obvious that a province like Assam was too diversified and unwieldy to be treated as one single and coherent unit. As such that symmetry and naturalness of division of the province which is expected of a unified conception are lacking in this province. The only factor that influenced and necessitated the division was administrative convenience. This spasmodic and irrational method of formation of the province had an interesting sequel. With the growth of education the different self-conscious communities have split themselves into political fragments. But this incongruous formation under a single administration had an advantage in a wider sense. It brought together under a single Government different races and communities and thus afforded opportunity to live together and understand each other which included broader national vision which was so urgent for a province like Assam.

The Administration of Assam was put in charge of a person who was Commissioner of the whole territory and Political Agent at the same time in frontier relations in 1826. The Commissioner, however, introduced a system of personal Government, rather than a formal regulated system. But in 1833 a system of codes was drawn up to guide the administrators in Assam Administration. But the hills which were inhabited by the wild tribes who presented a complex of social and political practices were still left unregulated. The Assam Code underwent further refinement in 1847, and finally replaced by the Civil Procedure Code in 1861 and Criminal Procedure Code in 1863. But these were only for the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley, not for the whole province. The hills remained outside the civil and criminal procedures of the British India.

When Assam was formed into a Chief Commissionership, the system of personal administration of the chief of the state

was not materially affected. Rather the Chief Commissioner became the fountain of all powers and he guided practically the whole range of administration of the province. He was provided with assistants in the districts and no Head of any Department was there to help him at the headquarters save and except his Secretary and Assistant Secretary. Only jurisdiction of the High Court over the two valley districts was retained and he was relieved of appellate jurisdiction in those districts.

The province, however, progressed steadily and with its development, the administrative machinery had to be elaborated to provide for the changed circumstances. Thus we see in 1877 an Inspector General of Police was appointed and further he was given charge of the departments of Excise Stamps and made the Registrar-General of the province. In 1880, the judge of the Assam Valley was vested ex-officio with the powers of a Commissioner of a division. Further the Commissioner was relieved of judicial duties when Commissioner of Excise was given charge of the same in 1903. To cope with the developed agriculture and settlement works a Director of Land Records was appointed and given the charge of agriculture to relieve the Chief Commissioner.

In the Secretariat of the Chief Commissioner, business had multiplied and no longer one Secretary and an Assistant sufficed. More Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries were provided. At the time when Reforms of 1919 were introduced we find no less than two Secretaries and a number of under Secretaries in the Secretariat of the Chief Commissioner.

Thus looking at the successive developments it appear that the chief of Assam Commission was vested with more and more powers to deal with the peculiar needs of the province. Its strategic importance, undeveloped potentialities, the preponderantly tribal nature of its population required the personal care, initiative and unsophisticated system of administrative machinery to foster and grow the latent potentials. Therefore, it was separated from Bengal Government and put under Non-Regulated system of a Chief Commissioner. The Chief Commissioner was increasingly vested with administrative, executive and legislative powers. He was given the help of more responsible officers like the Heads of Administrative Departments, Divisional Commissioners and finally in recognition of the

progress of the province, Legislative Council was set up. Under Government of India Act, 1919, it was made a Governor's province.

In the Administration of Land Revenue the British had acquired some experience from Bengal. They wanted to rectify the mistakes they had already committed elsewhere in India. So when they commuted the manual labour in favour of monetary payment they introduced ryotwary system of settlement with the people. Under the system they began to collect revenue directly from the cultivators of land, but utilised the indigenous institutions for the collection as far as it suited their purpose. Thus Choudhuries and Mouzadars were employed for the collection of revenue but not under regular employment as salaried servants but as commission agents who would take pains for collection. Settlement was made periodically thus retaining the future possibility of enhancement of demand. From 1870 we find them following a system of decennial settlement when tacitly the principle of hereditary succession to land was recognised but never the rent was fixed as under permanent settlement. To accommodate the Ahom practices and thus allay the lay and temporal magnets provision was made for special revenue tenures. Thus Chamua, Khat, Six-pie Lakhiraj and Tentwenties in Sibsagar were provided. Besides these were Nisf Khiraj tenures for Brahmuttar and Dharmuttar lands were also provided. To increase revenue and bring more and more land under production special rules were provided for the Assam Valley. Wild lands could be taken up for cultivation and could be given up with due notice. People taking up fallow land enjoyed right to enjoy some benefits like exemption of revenue for some years and then revenue was imposed at a progressive rate. This helped the plantation industry in particular and attracted immigrants from outside the province.

In the hill districts where Jhum cultivation was practised by the tribes revenue was assessed in a different manner. A poll-tax was realised from each house through the village whip. In the permanently settled areas of Sylhet and Goalpara the revenue system was the same as in Bengal because agreement to that effect had already been arrived at before they were transferred to Assam.

For the administration of land revenue survey of land was essential. Survey of land of the new province beginning with cadastral system was systematised by the introduction of theodolite system. Duly surveyed land register was maintained and transfer of land was registered. Registry offices were set up althrough the province. Where land transaction was frequent Sub-Registrar's offices were set-up.

To invigorate the land revenue administration, to stimulate agriculture and proper maintenance of records a highly responsible officer of the rank of Assam Commission with the designation of Director of Agriculture and Land Records was appointed as early as 1882. A separate revenue staff under a Sub-Deputy Collector was maintained at each sub-division. All executive officers of the Government had to possess a knowledge of the revenue system of the country and undertake the inspection of revenue administration while on tour.

Thus, in prospective it appears that Land Revenue Administration in Assam had assumed its definite shape by 1920. Historically it owes its origin to the practices inherited from the decadent period of Ahom rule and changed slowly, not without mistakes, by the British who were alien to the country. They could, only with difficulty, by degrees appreciate the requirements and feelings of the people and evolve a system of administration suitable for them.

The Administration of Justice in Assam during the Chief Commissionership period (1874-1920) had many distinctive features of its own. But it was not altogether a new system created for Assam. After the withdrawal of Martial Law from Assam it was administered as a Non-Regulation province. The chaotic conditions and the less developed races in Assam required a rough and ready system of judicial administration, particularly in the hill areas. The new conquerors tried to utilise the existing judicial institutions like the panchayats retaining the final appellate jurisdiction for their officers. Gradually a system of code was prepared for the new province. Experiments and developments continued for the preparation of a uniform system together with other provinces of India. In 1861 Indian Civil Code and Indian Penal Code was introduced in the Assam Valley districts.

When the Chief Commissionership was created in 1874 no fundamental change was effected in the judicial administration in Assam. Practically judicial administration which had already been devised continued in the province. Thus the executive of officers of the Assam Valley continued to try civil and criminal cases, the jurisdiction of High Court of Calcutta was also retained over the judiciary of Assam. In the Surma Valley separate judicial staff was retained as they were during Bengal administration. Only in the Hill districts the Chief Commissioner was the highest court of appeal in criminal cases where the High Court did not have jurisdiction except over the Europeans.

Laws in Assam were the same as they were in other province of India. But for the Hill districts all the laws were not operative. There the Chief Commissioner with the approval of the government of India introduced some or parts of some laws while excluded others. Usually the village chiefs dispensed justice applying customary laws.

Judicial officers under the High Court dispensed justice. The help of assessors was taken by them in the Assam Valley districts but in the Surma Valley the jury system prevailed. Legal counsels could be had by both the contestants in disputes from professional legal practitioners.

The Administration of Police in Assam during the period had evolved out of the exigencies of the situation. When the first Police Stations were established they were modelled on the Bengal Administration. Over a large area one Station was set-up under an officer with few assistants. But gradually when troops were withdrawn from different parts of the country more stations had to be set-up, in many places outposts had to be opened.

In Assam proper, however, crime was rare and professional crime was almost negligible. But in the Hill districts and Frontier Tracts tribal disputes sometimes took violent shape. In such areas armed police had to be quartered. Thus besides Civil Police some quasi-military forces were also created for police purposes in the province. The Police Act of 1861 introduced in Assam laid the basis of police administration of the province.

After Assam became a Chief Commissionership, the province needed more security for development purpose, particularly, from the predatory hordes from hill tracts. Therefore, Frontier Police had to be geared up for protecting the border. Sometimes it became necessary to send punitive expeditions into the hills. Therefore Frontier Police Force was reorganised in 1882 to constitute Military Police. Subsequently the terms of service of the Military Police were assimilated with the Indian Army and in 1920 it was renamed Assam Rifles.

When Sylhet was added to Assam, the Police Force of the province faced another difficulty. Large waterlogged fields known as haors and beels were used by people as highway of commerce and transport. Robbers and smugglers in these areas could not be properly tackled by the Civil Police of the province. Moreover the long waterways of Brahmaputra required guards and the Steamer stations of ferry service necessitated a different police set-up. A new River Police force had to be created for this purpose.

In Assam proper, that is, in the Brahmaputra Valley districts and hills no village or Rural Police was provided. Policing in these areas was a local responsibility. The village chiefs recognised by the Government served to function in police purpose as well. But in permanently settled areas of Sylhet and Goalpara a system of Rural Police was provided by the enactment of Chowkidari acts. Some municipalities provided Chowkidars for police purposes.

Though usually for quite a long time police officers for Assam were taken on loan from Bengal and reverted to their home province after they became experienced, police force of the province had rendered on the whole good services to the country. Besides preventing and detecting crimes, they also helped in the management of roads, market places of public meeting, fairs, and protecting even the crops of the people by managing the cattle pounds. As the Police Commission recorded on the whole police administration of the province was efficient.

Thus we find that by 1920 the province of Assam took a definite shape along with other provinces of the British India, evolving from a crude beginning. The function of the Chief Commissioner's Government was to lay down broad and general

principle for the guidance of its officers with due regard to the traditions of the province, but the functions of the Chief Commissioners, officers in Assam after 1912 had become formal and definite as in any province of British India. Though the administration lacked unity and symmetry although the province, yet it had assumed its final shape. The heterogenous character of both the people and administration of the province provided a unique example as to how diverse conditions could be brought under a single Government giving scope for mutual understanding and co-operation among the people, for the common good.

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