

The Boro Movement for the Roman Scripts (1974-75)

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The Boros, who happen to be one of the largest Mongloid communities in Assam witnessed their socio-political awakening only in the beginning of the 20th century. The historical developments had disqualified them from competing with other comparatively developed ethnic groups. As a result, they were often found being deprived from sharing the developments of the time. Besides in the Brahmaputra valley, since the time of the kings, the Boros underwent a tacit process of Aryanisation and Hinduisation who were converted into Assamese speaking Hindus. This process was mostly seen among the educated ones. An early intellectual awakening was thus delayed by the drainage of educated Boros. However, the spread of the Brahma religion in the Goalpara district of then Assam gave partial check to this process. In the beginning of the 20th century few social reformers like Baba Kalicharan Brahma, Modaram Brahma and others emerged out of the Boros professing the Brahma religion who dedicated themselves for the socio-political upliftment of this community. They established schools in the Boro populated areas and fought with the British Government for their political rights. The process set in motion by these social reformers gained momentum in the beginning of the second half of the present century. During this period, the Boros formed different socio-political organisations by which they sought to preserve their culture and language. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, formed in 1952 was one of these organisations.

The linguistic movement of the Boros started with the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. The Boros, whose original script is yet to be discovered from the depth of the history, had been provisionally using the Assamese script since the introduction of their language as the medium of instruction in 1963. However, since the formation of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), the members of the Sabha and some Boro intellectuals

were said to have been examining the suitability of different scripts to adopt for their language.¹ In the beginning of the 1960s, there had been a general aspiration among the Boro students and leaders in Shillong for adoption of Roman which they found to be most suitable script for their language. This idea was later on placed before the BSS. The BSS after prior studies decided to accept Roman Script for the Boro language in 1970. In 1974, the Sabha introduced the Boro Primer *Bithorai* (*Balab-se*) in class I of Boro Medium Primary Schools in its own accord. This ultimately brought the State Government in the scene. The Government refused to approve the Boro Primer *Bithorai*, rather stopped the payments of the Boro Medium Primary Schools teachers. As a result the BSS resorted to a movement which is known as the 'Roman Script Movement of 1974-75' in the history of Assam.

Historical Background of the Script Movement

The Roman Script Movement was masterminded by the Boro Sahitya Sabha which is the only literary organisation of this community. Therefore, it will be a matter of importance to give a brief history of this Sabha. As mentioned earlier, the BSS was formed on 16 November 1952. The immediate demand of the Sabha for introduction of Boro language as the medium of instruction in the majority Boro populated areas was secured from the Government in 1963, firstly, in the primary level, during the Chief Ministership of Bimala Prasad Chaliha. This was extended till class VI in the year 1968. Ultimately, as a result of the constant demand made by the BSS, the Boro language was recognised as the medium of instruction in the Secondary stage in 1973, and by 1976 the first batch of Boro medium students appeared H.S.L.C. examination.

The attachment of the Boros to the Roman Script began in 1884, when Rev. Sydney Endle published his valuable work called '*A Hand Book of Kachari Grammar*' in Roman Script. His another creation was the authentic monograph '*The Kachari*' published in 1911 which includes few Boro folk-tales written in Roman Script. According to the former BSS president Ramdas Basumatary, the then Assam Government introduced Boro as the medium of instruction from 1904 to 1936 during which Roman Script was used.² In the light of above facts it is clear that the attachment of the Boros to the Roman Script was more than 50 years old.

According to Maniram Machahari, a founder member of the BSS, the idea of adopting Roman Script for the Boro language first came in the minds of few Boro students and leaders in Shillong. Among them were P. C. Brahma, Maniram Machahari, Late Maguram Machahari, Uttam Chand Brahma, J. B. Rajkumar (retired D. C.) Late J. B. Hagjer (minister) etc.³ This idea gained ground with the passage of time and towards the beginning of the 1960s, it became a general aspiration among the Boro intellectuals in Assam and with the acceptance of it by the BSS in the 1970, as mentioned earlier the question of Roman Script involved the whole Boro community.

The arguments of the BSS in favour of adoption of Roman Script was mainly on the ground of phonetics. The Boro language which belong to the Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group has typical sound and the BSS found Roman to be most suitable script for this language. Other arguments of the Sabha were the mechanical advantages like typing, printing, its usability, its technical subject etc. The report of the 'Script Sub-Committee' gives a detailed record on this matter which will be discussed in the proper place.

The Assamese Language Movement of 1960, which sought to introduce Assamese as the official language of the state changed the course of Assam history. Its effect on the hill tribes was quick and decisive. The different communities of Assam plains also opposed this movement. Their opposition may be observed from the resolution passed in "All Assam Non-Assamese Language Conference' held at Silchar on 2 July 1960, The resolution goes as under :

*The conference of the non-Assamese speaking people of Assam strongly opposes the move to impose Assamese as the official language for the state of Assam and that the status quo based on the intrinsically multilingual character of the state must be maintained for the peace and security of eastern region of India.*⁴

This conference was attended by the leaders of different communities, both hills and plains. As a protest against the demand of the Assamese the hill tribes raised voice demanding English as their official language. While the people of Cachar demanded Bengali as the official language in their district. The Boros too, as a sign of protest demanded Hindi as the official language for the whole state of Assam.⁵ The

reason behind such reactions against the demand of the Assamese community was perhaps their fear of linguistic domination by the Assamese, which might have adversely affected the growth of their culture and language. A fear that must have been shared by the Boros too, and its indirect contribution to the last Script Movement remains in the logic of history.

Sequence of Events

It has been already mentioned earlier that the idea of adopting Roman Script for the Boro language was first propagated by a group of Boro students and leaders of Shillong which was placed before the BSS in its 6th Annual Conference held at Malaguri of Goalpara district on 22nd and 23rd February, 1964. Next year in February 1965 in the 7th Annual Conference of the BSS, held at Mashalpur the students raised the question of Roman Script again. Consequently in the 8th Annual Conference held at Kokrajhar, on 4th to 6th January of 1966, the BSS formed an 'Expert-Committee' to examine the feasibility of Roman Script for the Boro language. The Committee was directed to submit its Report before 30 January 1966 on the basis of which, acceptance of Roman Script was to be finalised. But the Expert Committee which consisted of five members with Jogendra Kumar Basumatary as its convenor could not submit the Report in time. As a result, on 3 March 1968 the 9th Annual Conference of the BSS held at Dudhnai passed the No. 11 resolution dissolving the Expert Committee and forming a new 'Bodo Script Sub-Committee'. The Script Sub-Committee consisted of nine members of which Saisengra Machahari was made the Convenor.⁶

The final sitting of the Bodo Script Sub-Committee was on 9 February 1969 at Gauhati. The Report prepared by this sitting was submitted to the BSS in the conference held at Udalguri of Darrang district, in the first week of March 1969. The extract of the Report goes as under :

We the members of the Bodo Script Sub-Committee appointed by the Bodo Sahitya, Sabha assembled on the 9th February 1969 at Gauhati to discuss on the script question and to find out a solution to it. After a long discussion on the matter and examination of the opinions received from various organisations and individuals the authorised Sub-Committee has, by majority, decided in favour of the Roman Script on the following considerations.⁷

The ten points 'considerations' strongly recommended Roman Script for the Boro language on the grounds of its "quick and easy learning" possibility which needs "only 26 (twenty six) letters.....Whereas there are more than 300 (three hundred) letters including compound letters and other variations in Assamese, Bengali or Devanagari Script", its "suitable' and "easy mechanical manipulation that is typing, printing, sending message etc.' The 'considerations' also argued Roman Script to be "commercially economic" and "exclusively suitable as a medium for writing down scientific subjects and technical matters." It also recommended Roman Script on the ground of maintenance of "uniformity of spelling and pronunciation amongst all sections of the Bodo people of different places, States and Lands using different dialects and state languages' and also to enable to maintain link amongst the "Bodo Speaking people living as they are in other countries outside India, such as Nepal, South Bhutan, East Pakistan, and Western Burma."⁸

The report of the above mentioned Script Sub-Committee was discussed in the 11th Annual Conference, held on the 24th to 26th February, 1970, at Mahakalguri of West Bengal where the BSS passed the Resolution no. 10 for the adoption of the Roman Script. In the same conference the Sabha passed the Resolution no. 11 according to which a 'Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee' was formed. The Sub-Committee consisted of eight members of which Thaneswar Boro and Kanakeswar Narzery were made the Chairman and Con-venor respectively. The Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee had three consecutive sittings. In the third sitting, held in Janajati Night High School in Gauhati on 23 August 1970 which was presided over by Thaneswar Boro and was attended by seven members prepared the final report. In the report, the Implementation Sub-Committee suggested the BSS to initiate the implementation by publishing all the official circulars and pamphlets in Roman Script. The report also suggested to arrange seminars and free classes to familiarise the Roman Script, mainly with the Boro teachers, the L. P. and M. E. school children and the old batch of Boro writers. The Implementation Sub-Committee also made recommendation, consisting of eight points. These points advised the BSS to appeal the authorised writers to convert their Text Books in Roman Script, to approach the Commission for Minority

Languages of India to sanction grants for publication of pamphlets in Roman Script and for holding seminars and classes. The Implementation Sub-Committee also suggested the BSS to approach the Assam Government for the approval of the Text Books written in Roman Script, and to form a permanent Body of Experts which was to advise the BSS from time to time in matters of proposed implementation, spellings, pronunciation, formation of more words and terms, holding extra departmental examinations in Boro language etc. It also advised the Sabha to accept the existing Roman or English alphabet with few modifications. In the Clause 8(a) of its recommendation the Sub-Committee suggested the BSS to introduce the Boro Text Books written in Roman Script from Class I in Primary stages, step by step starting right from the academic year of 1971.⁹

The report of the Roman Script Sub-Committee was submitted to the BSS Central Executive Committee which met on 22 December 1970 at Gosaigaon. The Central Executive Committee passed the Resolution Nos. 1 and 2 whereby it resolved to "introduce the Roman Script from the academic session 1972 in conformity with the proposed new curriculum of the Board of Secondary Education, Assam, in lieu of the academic session 1971 as suggested by the Script Implementation Sub-Committee in its Report Clause No. 8 (a)" and according to the provision of the Resolution No. 2, the Executive Committee decided to "entrust the necessary modification with Central Text Book Sub-Committee and the Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee jointly."¹⁰

As per suggestion given by the resolution No 2 of the Central Executive Committee, a joint sitting of the Bodo Text Book Sub-Committee and the Roman Script Implementation Sub-Committee was held on 10 January 1971 in Gauhati. The meeting was attended by 13 out of 17 members and with unanimous support the Resolution no. 1 was passed in which the Sub-Committees suggested that "the existing Roman Script, English Alphabet should be accepted, as it is, for the Roman Script Bodo Alphabet. The order, names and sounds of its letters should also be retained for the time being, subject to further modification if and when any more suitable and appropriate names and sounds for them are found out."¹¹

However, the official records of the BSS show that the Sabha could not materialise its decision of implementing the

Roman Script from the academic session of 1972. During this period the BSS was found being absorbed in the question of extension of Boro medium beyond Class VI, which posed as an immediate problem before the Sabha. By the year of 1972, the students studying in the Boro medium had reached Class VI. Therefore, its extension in the Secondary Stage had become a crucial issue for the BSS. The extract of the Resolution no. 9 passed in the sitting of the Central Working Committee of the BSS which met in Janajati Night High School, Gauhati, on the 12th December testifies this fact. Besides, the press note No. BSS/PN/1/73 issued by the General Secretary of the Sabha notes that the BSS had to resort to a movement in the month of March and April of 1973 for the same demand.¹² However, the Government of Assam conceded the demand of introducing Boro medium in the Secondary stage in June 1973.¹³ This enabled the BSS to resume the Roman Script issue.

The year of 1974 is remarkable in the history of the BSS. In this year, the BSS in its 15th Annual Conference, held at Kholmati near Tezpur, on 15th to 17th March 1974, resolved to implement Roman Script. The Resolution No. 11 which contains the decision of the BSS to implement the Roman Script reads as follows :

This 15th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha ratifies the Resolution No. 7 passed in the 14th Annual Conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha held at Salbari in the month of March 1973 and unanimously has decided to implement the Bodo Primer Bithorai in Roman Script in class I of Bodo Medium Primary Schools from the academic year 1974.¹⁴

To accomplish this decision the BSS on 22 April 1974, organised an inaugural ceremony, in which the Roman Script was declared as the common script for the Boro language and literature, throughout Assam and outside and openly declared the introduction of *Bithorai (Balab-se)*, the Boro Primer written in Roman Script. The General Secretary of BSS, appealed to all the teachers of the Boro Medium Primary Schools to introduce the above mentioned Boro Primer *Bithorai* in Class I.¹⁵

The act of the BSS, introducing the Boro Primer *Bithorai* without the approval of the authority concerned ultimately

brought the Government of Assam in the scene. The Government ordered to stop payments to the teachers of the Boro Medium Primary Schools where Roman Script was found introduced as well as it ordered to stop the grants to those schools. Consequently, the payments of the Boro Medium Primary teacher and grants of the Boro Medium Schools were stopped from June 1974. The deputation consisting of 26 representatives of the Nalbari District Primary Bodo Teachers' Association, when inquired in the Regional Board for Elementary Education, Nalbari, on the 16th July '74 was told that such measure was taken as per the order of the Government of Assam.¹⁶

The decision of the Government to stop the payments and grants of the Boro Medium Primary Schools and Teachers precipitated the situation. The BSS, in its turn, decided to launch a movement and in the 'Programme' circulated by the Sabha, appealed to the Boros to come out in thousands and join the four phased movement.

In response to the call of the BSS, on 12 September 1974, the Boro Students abstained from their classes. The second phase of the movement continued from 18 September to 21 September. During this phase of the movement, the Boro picketers gathered in front of the Sub-divisional and District Head Offices and raised slogans.

At the end of the second phase, the movement was called off temporarily. This was done in response to the appeal made by the Boro Ministers and MLAs, in whose mediation a joint memorandum of the Bodo Ministers, Boro MLAs and the BSS was submitted to the Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Sinha on 24 September 1974. This however, did not receive any response from the Government. As a result, the BSS resumed the third phase of its movement from 27 September 1974.¹⁷

The third phase, which lasted till the 28th November had proved to be the most spirited and significant movement in the history of the Boros. The Boro volunteers came out in thousands and demonstrated in front of the Sub-divisional and District Head Offices. According to the official reports, the Boro volunteers were said to have been found being violent in many places. Incident of police firing first took place in the district of Goalpara where on the 18th and 19th November six Boro volunteers and two CRP were killed. The official report noted, "Police fired to disperse about 10,000 armed

tribals who stormed the Sub-Deputy Collector's office at Bijni in Goalpara district" and the disturbance spread to Kokrajhar and Gosaigaon townships of the district when about 15,000 tribals armed with lethal weapons demonstrated in front of the office of the Sub-deputy Collector's and block development offices."¹⁸ At Udalguri in the district of Darrang, one person was killed as a result of police firing and on 25 November more than six hundred Boro volunteers were arrested. At Tangla, Rowta and other adjoining areas situation remained tense while at Rangia police resorted to lathi charge.¹⁹

The reports furnished by the official agencies which claimed that the Boro volunteers were equipped with lethal weapons, perhaps needs a cross examination with that of the BSS report. In a press statement, the BSS President noted that on 18 November around 3000 Boro volunteers were demonstrating peacefully in front of the Sidli Sub-deputy collector's office. A band of CRPs chased them and also fired from their guns. Narrating the incident of Bijni which took place on 19 November 1974 the President says that around 10,000 demonstrators gathered in front of the Sub-deputy collector's office. According to the report received from the Sahitya Sabha observer, the picketers did not carry any lethal weapon except fastoons and playcards. Basing on the report of the BSS's observer, the President argued that if the 10,000 picketers were really equipped with lethal weapons only seven CRPs would have not been injured. Another argument of the President was that among the picketers there was a big number of woman, and in their presence the male picketers would have not taken a risk of confronting with the CRPs. According to the observer of the BSS the CRPs fired on a crowd of ten thousand picketers. This created excitement resulting stampede in which seven CRPs were injured. On the contrary, on that day, 3 picketers were killed in police firing and more than ten were injured. Till the day of this press statement as many as ten Boro volunteers lost their lives in police firings.²⁰

While the movement was on its zenith the Assam Government appealed to the BSS to sit for a discussion and solve the script problem thereby. The BSS accepted the call of the Government and as a result, a talk between the Education Minister Harendra Nath Talukdar and ten representatives of the Sabha was held on 28 November 1974. In the talk the Education Minister assured to consider the demands of the

BSS provided the latter agrees to withdraw the agitation to create a congenial atmosphere for further negotiations. The BSS hoping solution of its problem through discussions called off the agitation from the 29th November 1974. Consequently, series of discussions were held between the Government and the representatives of the BSS which however could not evolve any solution. In the talk held on the 14th February 1975, the Chief Minister told the BSS representatives that Education being both in the state and concurrent list should be solved on the national basis. He assured to have a final talk after visiting Delhi for necessary directions. According to the Education Ministry script issue had to be "examined in the spirit of better understanding, closer relationship amongst the various people living in the state and national integrity."²¹

The unyielding discussions with the Education Minister and the Chief Minister made it clear to the BSS that the State Government was not willing to solve the script issue of the Boros. Besides, the Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS) too failed to come to a concensus with the BSS in this regard. This perhaps created a fear of being imposed Assamese Script, which must have increased when the Education Minister referred to a closer relationship among the various people living in the State, a status quo that the Assamese elite group too sought to maintain by the continuation of the Assamese Script which was already in use.

The failure of the State Government to solve the script problem threw the BSS at the mercy of the Central Government. The Central Government, on its part, had been suggesting the Sabha to accept Devanagari Script. The Central Government already had few rounds of discussion with the members of the BSS. On 12 August 1974, while meeting the delegation of the BSS, the Central Petroleum Minister advised the former to accept Devanagari Script. Mr Dharanidhar Basumatary, the lone MP of this community on the 2nd March had submitted a formula to the Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Sinha in connection with the script issue where he strongly advocated in favour of Devanagari Script for the Boros. The Commissioner of Linguistic Minority Miss Dogra, while discussing with the BSS representatives from 30 September to 5 October made the same suggestion.²² The Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi also gave the same advice to the three BSS representatives who met her in Delhi.

The BSS finally fell between the jaws of the two Governments. The State Government remained unbending and unyielding to the problem of the Boros, while the Central Government had been constantly trying to persuade the BSS to accept Devanagari Script. But ultimately, on 9 April 1975, the two BSS representatives Ramdas Basumatary and Thaneswar Boro during their stay in Delhi prepared a proposal and submitted it to the Prime Minister. The proposal was written in favour of Devanagari Script. It also contained a complete scheme for its implementation.²³ This gave a sheer advantage to the Central Government and it announced the decision of the BSS to accept the Devanagari Script. The BSS officially accepted the Devanagari Script in its 16th Annual Conference held at Dhing on 25th to 27th April 1975. With this the Boro movement for the Roman Script ended without achieving its desired goal.

The acceptance of the Devanagari Script caused reactions among the Boro masses. Many of them were found raising voice of protest against this decision of the BSS. Even in the face of suffering and atrocities, the Boro masses were found being firm to their cause. B. N. Brahma, an advocate from Dhubri, in his letter to *The Assam Tribune* accused the two Sahitya Sabha members of taking arbitrary decision and appealed them to collect public opinion before implementation. He termed the acceptance of the Devanagari Script to be "bolt from the blue to Boro community in Assam and elsewhere."²⁴ Sukumar Basumatary, Malati Basumatary and Birendra Nath Brahma in their letter to *The Assam Tribune* blamed the two BSS leaders who took part in discussion in Delhi. According to them "the two-men BSS delegation to New Delhi unhesitatingly accepted Devanagari Script as alternative to Roman."²⁵ A section of Assamese intellectuals also spoke out against the acceptance of Devanagari and advocated to go back to the Assamese Script.

While writing on the script movement of the Boros, one should make a point to note about the strong opposition given by the Assamese elites, who clustered themselves within and without the Assam Sahitya Sabha. It has been already mentioned that the Assam Sahitya Sabha could not come to a consensus with the BSS in this regard. The Lekhok Hibir or the Writers' Conference organised by the Assam Sahitya Sabha from 6th to 9th November 1974, where the question of

Roman Script was discussed, ended with a suggestion that "for cultural integration and development of tribal languages in the state, Assamese Script is enough and suitable."²⁶ Many of the Assamese intellectuals put separatist colour on the movement and suspected hands of foreign missionaries behind it. A 'Special Representative' while writing on the Boro script movement in the *Saptahik Nilachal* noted the movement to be "a manifestation of strong anti-Assamese feeling" and related it to the Udayachal demand of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) saying them to be "the two sides of a coin."²⁷ He also waved certain events to show involvement of missionaries in the movement. Few Assamese elites were opposed to the introduction of Devanagari Script too. In Baganpara, the School Inspector H. Ahmed was found issuing Boro Text Books written in Assamese Script even long after the order of Implementation of the Devanagari Script. Besides, the Assamese teachers in the Baganpara Primary School protested implementation of Devanagari Script and threatened to stop the payments to the Boro teachers.²⁸

A review of the facts and events of the Boro movement for the Roman Script shows that the Boros were the victims of the leaders of their own. The arbitrary decision of the two BSS representatives had proved to be the main cause of the failure of the script movement. According to the opinions of the other members of the BSS they tempered with the original memorandum prepared by the Central Executive Committee of the Sabha. On the contrary, during their stay in Delhi they prepared a proposal in favour of the Devanagari Script and submitted it to the Central Government. Their switching over from Roman to Devanagari showed the lack of a strong determination to their cause. It is true that the BSS was placed in a deplorable condition, with the State Government unwilling to solve the problem and the Centre trying to persuade it to accept Devanagari Script. Even in such situation a strong leadership could have helped this community to achieve their demand. The sincerity of the other BSS members is also questionable. They officially accepted Devanagari Script in the 16th Annual Conferences held at Dhing without reservation.

Coupled with this was the strong opposition of the Assamese elites that largely contributed to the failure of the script movement of the Boros. The opposition raised by the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Assamese intellectuals outside it, have

been already noted earlier. Such an opposition of the Assamese community which dominated almost all the institutions in the State, must have had created a situation where the Sinha Government found it difficult to take a decision of its own. The argument of the Assam Sahitya Sabha was that the adoption of the Roman Script by the Boros would bring cultural disintegrity and communal disharmony in the state of Assam, appears to be an one sided view. The Assamese idea of achieving integrity of the state by using one script may not be practicable in a democratic country where constitutional safeguards are given for the culture and language of the different ethnic groups. In any case, integrity of a state or of a nation can not be confined to the use of one script or one language. Especially in India, where various ethnic groups with different cultures and languages are found, the integrity has to be a composite whole of all the diversities of the different communities. Otherwise, integrity of India or any of the states may mean cultural imperialism of a dominant group on the others. In that case, there are more chances of one being alienated by the other, which ultimately may lead to socio-political unrest, shaking the very idea of integrity of a state or of a nation.

Added to this was the unyielding attitude of the State Government. It is true that in the wake of the script movement of the Boros, the State Government was placed under the sphere of three opposing forces—the Boros demanding Roman Script, the Assamese community pressing hard for the continuation of the Assamese Script and the Centre trying to champion for national integrity by introducing Devanagari Script. But perhaps a strong State Government could have solved the script issue in the state level itself. Pitsing Kanwar, a MIA (Ind), while discussing the Roman Script issue in the Assembly urged the State Government not to allow the Centre to “interfere in the matter of language which was a state subject.”²⁰ But the Sinha Government could not solve without necessary ‘directions’ from the Centre.

The Roman Script Movement of 1974-75 is the first of its kind in the history of the Boro community. Propagated by a small group of Boro students and leaders of Shillong, the idea of adopting Roman Script spread among the Boro intelligentsia and the acceptance of it by the BSS involved the whole Boro community. The intensity of the movement engulfed almost every corner of Boro populated areas and in

the course of the movement as many as 15 volunteers died.²⁰ As mentioned earlier, the main cause of failure of this movement was the lack of able leadership which was accelerated by the opposition of the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the uncompromising attitude of the state Government.

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