



Women in India: Pillars of Society and Guardians of Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: India, renowned for its diverse cultural landscape and deep-rooted traditions, has experienced notable societal changes over the past decade and a half. Its social fabric is a complex mix of enduring customs and contemporary influences, shaped by ancient traditions, globalization, technological progress, and socio-economic reforms. Women have historically been central to shaping and preserving India's societal structure, and their roles continue to evolve amidst these transformations. This study examines the multifaceted dimensions of Indian society and culture from 2008 to 2023, focusing on how women's roles, challenges, and contributions have contributed to societal resilience and development. It highlights women's navigation of traditional expectations, their embrace of new opportunities, and their impact on societal progress, illustrating the dynamic nature of India's social fabric.

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Introduction

India is often celebrated as a land of extraordinary diversity, with a civilization that spans thousands of years. Its society is an intricate mosaic of traditions, religions, languages, and customs that have evolved over centuries. This blend of influences results in a society deeply anchored in its historical legacy yet highly adaptable to contemporary changes. The cultural identity of India encompasses ancient philosophies, religious pluralism, linguistic variety, and modern global trends, making it one of the most complex and intriguing societies worldwide.

The Rich Cultural Heritage of India

India's history extends beyond three millennia, with archaeological sites such as the Indus Valley Civilization providing evidence of early urban planning, art, and social organization. Over the ages, this ancient civilization has been shaped by successive cultural influences from the spiritual and philosophical foundations laid by the Vedic traditions, to the flourishing of arts, sciences, and governance under the Mauryan and Gupta empires. Later periods saw the Islamic Sultanates and Mughal rule, which introduced architectural innovations and new cultural paradigms. The arrival of European traders and colonizers, especially the British, brought about new administrative systems, legal structures, and educational institutions, leaving a lasting impact on Indian society. After gaining independence, India embarked on a path of nation-building, striving to balance its rich heritage with aspirations for modernization and progress. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding the social evolution of India in recent decades.

Cultural and Social Transformation in the 21st Century

The first decades of the 21st century have marked a period of rapid change for India. The country's economy expanded swiftly, driven by liberalization policies introduced in the 1990s that integrated India into the global market. This economic growth fostered an expanding middle class, urban development, and shifting consumption patterns, which in turn influenced societal values and lifestyles. Technological innovations, particularly in communication and information technology, have transformed daily life; mobile phones, the internet, and social media platforms have connected people across rural and urban areas, encouraging cultural exchange and social activism. These advances have also empowered marginalized groups, including women, encouraging more active participation in societal affairs. Simultaneously, India is witnessing ongoing discussions surrounding gender roles, social justice, and cultural identity. Movements advocating for women's rights, caste equality, and minority protections have gained prominence, challenged traditional hierarchies and promoted greater inclusivity.

The Role of Women: From Tradition to Transformation

Historically, women in India have been regarded as the custodians of cultural and spiritual traditions, often playing the role of nurturers within their families. However, their participation in public life was frequently restricted by societal norms rooted in patriarchal values, caste distinctions, and religious doctrines. Despite these limitations,

women have historically contributed significantly to preserving cultural practices, managing household responsibilities, and fostering community bonds. In recent decades, however, there has been a remarkable shift. Women's engagement in education, employment, politics, arts, and social activism has increased markedly. Their growing presence and influence reflect broader changes in societal attitudes towards gender roles and structural reforms. Women are now actively challenging stereotypes, asserting their rights, and playing an essential part in nation-building efforts. This essay examines this complex evolution, exploring how Indian society and culture have transformed over the past 15 years, emphasizing women's vital contributions as agents of change. It aims to analyse the social forces that have influenced norms, the hurdles women have faced, and the new opportunities that have emerged for their meaningful participation in shaping the nation's future.

The Significance of the Past 15 Years

The period from 2008 to 2023 has been pivotal in India's social and cultural evolution. It encompasses key milestones such as the rollout of landmark policies like the Right to Education (RTE), the launch of Digital India, the enactment of laws addressing sexual violence, and the rising prominence of Indian women leaders and activists on the global stage. During this timeframe, India has shifted from traditional societal models toward more progressive, inclusive frameworks. The surge of social movements, widespread digital connectivity, and comprehensive policy reforms have collectively contributed to redefining societal norms. Women's roles have expanded beyond domestic settings, breaking barriers in politics, business, sports, arts, and social activism. At the same time, issues like gender-based violence, discrimination, and socio-economic disparities continue to pose challenges. Nevertheless, the resilience and agency demonstrated by Indian women during this era highlight their crucial role in fostering societal stability and progress.

Framework of the Analysis

This essay is organized into sections that systematically explore the development of Indian society and culture over the past 15 years. It begins with a historical overview of India's cultural roots, illustrating how these foundations continue to shape contemporary social structures. The narrative then focuses on key societal transformations driven by economic growth, technological progress, and social reforms. A central theme is the changing role of women, examining their participation in various sectors, the obstacles they encounter,

and their contributions to cultural preservation and societal advancement. The analysis also discusses ongoing challenges and future prospects, emphasizing that women's empowerment remains integral to India's overall development.

Part II: The Role of Women in Indian Society (2008–2023)

India's societal fabric has long been intertwined with gender-specific norms, where women's roles were mostly confined to family and domestic responsibilities, yet their importance in cultural and spiritual traditions was widely acknowledged. Over the last 15 years, however, this landscape has undergone significant change. Women across India have increasingly made their presence felt in areas such as education, politics, the economy, social activism,

Progress and Challenges (2008–2023)

Over the past fifteen years, India has experienced a notable transformation in women's engagement across various domains of life. This progress has been driven by efforts from the government, civil society, and the women themselves, although many obstacles still exist.

Advancements in Education and Literacy**

One of the most significant achievements has been the rise in female literacy rates and improved access to education. Data from UNESCO indicates that India's female literacy rate increased from around 53% in 2008 to more than 70% by 2023. This growth can be linked to initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) and programs focused on promoting girls' education, such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child). Gaining higher levels of education has equipped women with essential knowledge, analytical skills, and confidence, enabling them to participate more actively in societal affairs. Women are now pursuing degrees in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), challenging stereotypes and opening up new career opportunities.

Involvement in Politics and Leadership Roles

The political representation of women has improved, though it has not yet achieved full parity. A landmark event was the election of Draupadi Murmu as India's 15th President in 2022, marking her as the first tribal woman to occupy the country's highest constitutional office. Prominent leaders like Sonia Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee have showcased women's ability to lead and make impactful decisions. Policies such as the

reservation of 33% of local government seats for women have further facilitated their involvement at grassroots levels. These developments have created opportunities for women to influence social and economic policies that directly impact their lives.

Economic Participation and Entrepreneurial Initiatives

Women's participation in the workforce has grown substantially across sectors like IT, healthcare, education, agriculture, and business. Programs such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have empowered numerous rural women to become entrepreneurs, fostering financial independence and community development. Campaigns like '*Make in India*' and '*Start-up India*' have motivated women entrepreneurs to innovate and lead new ventures. As a result, women-led startups are emerging in fields such as e-commerce, financial technology, and social enterprises, challenging traditional gender roles and contributing positively to economic growth.

Cultural and Social Activism

Women have emerged as influential advocates for social justice and human rights. The 2012 *Nirbhaya protests*, following a brutal assault in Delhi, sparked nationwide awareness about sexual violence and led to stricter legal measures. Women's activism has also addressed issues such as child marriage, honour killings, domestic violence, and rights for LGBTQ+ individuals. The #MeToo movement, which gained momentum in 2018, shed light on harassment and empowered women to speak out, fostering greater accountability and societal change.

Influence of Technology and the Digital Age

The advent of digital technology has significantly amplified women's voices and agency. Women are harnessing social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to raise awareness, share personal stories, and mobilize communities for various causes. Online educational resources and e-learning platforms have expanded access to knowledge, especially for women in remote or underserved regions. Digital tools have also supported women-led businesses, peer networks, and activism efforts, opening new pathways for empowerment and participation.

Persistent Challenges

Despite these positive trends, several issues continue to impede complete gender equality in India. Cases of domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and honour killings still

occur across the country. The 2012 Nirbhaya incident and subsequent legal reforms highlight the ongoing severity of violence against women, although societal attitudes change slowly. Women from marginalized communities such as tribal groups, Dalits, or those in rural areas face compounded difficulties, including limited access to education, healthcare, and employment. Deep-seated patriarchal beliefs and cultural stereotypes often restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and independence. Workplace harassment and safety concerns remain prevalent, discouraging many women from participating fully in the economy. While progress has been made in increasing women's representation in leadership roles, significant gaps remain, especially in corporate boards and high political offices. Addressing these persistent issues requires continuous policy initiatives, community engagement, legal enforcement, and cultural shifts.

The Recent Role of Women in Society

- **Continued Push for Equality:** The fight for gender equality will likely continue, but the focus will shift to tangible outcomes rather than just theoretical equality. This includes closing the gender pay gap, increasing representation in leadership positions, and addressing systemic biases in various sectors.
- **Balancing Work and Family:** Women will continue to strive for a better balance between professional aspirations and family responsibilities. This will involve more flexible work arrangements, affordable childcare options, and societal support for shared parenting.
- **Impact Of Technology:** Technology will likely continue to shape women's roles. This includes opportunities in tech-related fields but also challenges related to digital literacy, online safety, and the potential for displacement in certain industries.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Women's economic empowerment will remain a crucial aspect. This means access to education, financial resources, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Health and Well-Being:** Mental health and well-being will be increasingly important for women. This includes addressing gender-specific health issues and promoting a supportive environment.
- **Political Participation:** Women's political participation will be a significant factor. This involves increasing representation in political offices and advocating for policies that benefit women and girls.
- **Intersectionality:** The understanding and recognition of intersectionality will be crucial. This means acknowledging how gender intersects with other identities like

race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, leading to a more nuanced approach to issues.

- **Global Challenges:** Global challenges like climate change, economic instability, and social unrest will likely affect women disproportionately. This will necessitate a collaborative approach to address these issues and support women's resilience. In this way we can say that the role of women in society will be diverse and multifaceted. While significant progress has been made, challenges persist, and the future will depend on societal efforts to foster inclusivity, equity, and support for women's aspirations.

Key Contributions of Women in Preserving and Transforming Society

Despite these challenges, women have made extraordinary contributions to India's social and cultural fabric over the past decade and a half, playing an essential role in both maintaining traditions and fostering change.

Education and Literacy

The rise in women's literacy has been a catalyst for societal transformation. Educated women tend to participate more actively in civic and community life, advocate for their rights, and contribute to family well-being. Their higher educational levels have led to improvements in maternal health, reductions in child mortality, and increased household income. Furthermore, educated women are more likely to challenge social norms that perpetuate gender inequality, thereby driving broader cultural shifts.

Political Involvement

Women's active engagement in politics has led to more inclusive governance. Their presence in legislative assemblies, local councils, and national institutions ensures that issues like health, safety, and education are prioritized. The election of women like Draupadi Murmu as President symbolizes breaking barriers and inspires younger generations to aim for leadership roles.

Economic Empowerment

Women's participation in various economic sectors has fueled development. Their entrepreneurial efforts and workforce involvement contribute significantly to household income and the nation's economy. Micro-enterprises and self-help groups in rural areas have improved living standards and strengthened community resilience. Economic independence also enhances women's influence within families and society at large.

Cultural and Social Advocacy

Women have been at the forefront of social reform, organizing protests, awareness campaigns, and advocacy initiatives. Their efforts have challenged oppressive customs, promoted gender equality, and reshaped societal expectations. Campaigns against child marriage and violence against women have resulted in legal reforms and increased societal awareness.

Utilizing Technology and Digital Platforms

Women are increasingly leveraging digital tools for education, entrepreneurship, and activism. Social media campaigns amplify their voices, while online learning opportunities broaden access to knowledge. Many women entrepreneurs are launching innovative startups, using digital marketing and e-commerce to reach wider markets. Digital literacy initiatives further empower women to actively participate in the digital economy. In conclusion, women form the backbone of India's ongoing societal transformation, driving change, preserving cultural heritage, and shaping a future that embodies the richness, resilience, and diversity of this ancient civilization.

Case Studies and Remarkable Personalities

The remarkable strides made by women in India over the last decade and a half are vividly exemplified through inspiring stories of individual leaders and activists who have significantly impacted society. These women embody qualities such as resilience, innovation, advocacy, and leadership, challenging stereotypes and paving the way for future generations. Their journeys not only highlight personal achievements but also mirror broader societal transformations toward gender equality, social justice, and national development.

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw: A Pioneer in Biotechnology and Business Leadership

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw stands out as one of India's most influential entrepreneurs and a trailblazer in the biotech sector. She established Biocon in 1978, which has grown into one of Asia's leading bio-pharmaceutical firms. Her rise from a small-town girl in Bangalore to a global industry leader exemplifies increasing female participation in science, technology, and entrepreneurship. Her story is a testament to breaking gender barriers in a traditionally male-dominated field. When she launched Biocon, India's biotech industry was still emerging, and women entrepreneurs faced societal and institutional biases. Shaw's perseverance and innovative vision transformed her

company into a global enterprise dedicated to affordable medicines and groundbreaking research. Her leadership has bolstered India's reputation in bio-technology and inspired many women to pursue careers in science and business. Beyond her entrepreneurial achievements, Shaw has actively championed women's empowerment, education, and health initiatives. She advocates for increased STEM opportunities for women and emphasizes the importance of fostering an inclusive environment that supports women's success at the highest levels of innovation and management.

Malala Yousafzai: A Global Advocate for Girls' Education

Although Malala Yousafzai is Pakistani, her influence extends far beyond borders, inspiring millions of girls and women across India and South Asia. Her story resonates deeply in India, where access to quality education for girls remains a challenge, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Malala's advocacy for girls' education gained international prominence after she survived an attack by the Taliban in 2012 due to her outspoken stance on the right to education in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. Her unwavering dedication to this cause earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, making her the youngest laureate in history. Her courage and activism have spurred efforts within India to promote girls' education and challenge societal norms that hinder female schooling. Many NGOs and government programs draw inspiration from her example, emphasizing that education is a fundamental right and a catalyst for social change. Malala's story underscores the vital importance of empowering girls through education, a key driver for gender equality, economic growth, and social stability in India.

Kashmiri Women's Activism: Agents of Peace and Social Reform

Women in Kashmir have played a complex yet vital role amid ongoing conflict and peace efforts. Despite facing violence, social upheaval, and political instability, Kashmiri women have emerged as influential advocates for peace, social reform, and cultural preservation. Historically marginalized in political and societal spheres, many Kashmiri women have actively engaged in movements promoting non-violence and dialogue, often risking their safety. Their participation in peace marches, awareness campaigns, and local governance highlights their crucial role in fostering social cohesion. Organizations such as the Women's Collective in Kashmir work tirelessly to promote education, healthcare, and women's rights, even in the face of ongoing conflict. They serve as custodians of cultural identity and champions of social change, emphasizing

that peace and stability are deeply inter-connected with women's empowerment. Additionally, Kashmiri women have been instrumental in addressing social issues like child marriage, domestic violence, and access to healthcare. Their activism has brought attention to the struggles faced by women in conflict zones, fostering resilience and hope for social transformation. Their stories challenge stereo-typical narratives that portray Kashmiri women solely as victims, instead highlighting their roles as active contributors to peace building and community development. Their resilience exemplifies how women can serve as catalysts for societal change, even under difficult circumstances. Together, these stories reflect a wider societal shift recognizing women as vital leaders, advocates, and innovators. Their achievements challenge stereo-types, motivate future generations, and underscore the importance of gender equality for India's sustainable progress. As India moves forward, these compelling narratives serve as powerful inspiration for social advancement and inclusive development.

Part III: Societal Challenges and Opportunities

India's rapid development over recent years has unlocked numerous opportunities for women's empowerment and societal growth. However, deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural issues continue to hinder full gender equality and social harmony. Understanding these challenges is essential for designing effective policies and fostering inclusive progress. At the same time, these obstacles present opportunities for innovation, reform, and building a more equitable society.

1. Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

Despite notable advancements in education, employment, and political representation, gender inequalities persist in many aspects of Indian society. Violence against women remains a critical concern domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and honour killings are still widespread, often concealed within private spaces, complicating efforts to address them comprehensively. Trafficking and exploitation are serious issues, especially for women and girls from marginalized communities, often driven by socio-economic vulnerabilities and weak law enforcement. The #MeToo movement has played a significant role in amplifying women's voices, exposing harassment, and challenging patriarchal mindsets. Although legal reforms have been introduced to combat violence and harassment, enforcement remains inconsistent, and societal stigmas continue to discourage victims from seeking justice. Opportunities for progress include increasing awareness, strengthening legal protections, and fostering societal shifts through

education and community engagement. Empowering women to speak out and establishing accessible support networks are crucial steps toward safer environments.

2. Caste and Economic Divides

Discrimination based on caste and socio-economic status continues to divide Indian society, disproportionately affecting women from marginalized groups such as Dalits and Adivasis. These women often face compounded discrimination, including social exclusion, limited access to education and healthcare, and increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Efforts like affirmative action, reservations in education and employment, and social justice campaigns aim to address these disparities. For instance, reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in political and educational institutions seek to improve representation and uplift marginalized populations. Grassroots organizations work diligently to combat caste prejudices and promote social inclusion. However, progress remains uneven, especially in rural areas, and challenges like caste-based violence and discrimination persist. Empowering women from disadvantaged backgrounds through education, economic opportunities, and leadership development is vital for breaking cycles of poverty and exclusion.

3. Rural-Urban Divide

The divide between rural and urban areas continues to pose a significant challenge to women's opportunities and well-being. Rural regions often lack adequate infrastructure such as healthcare, quality education, transportation, and sanitation limiting women's access to essential services and opportunities for participation. Women in rural settings often carry heavy domestic and agricultural workloads with limited access to healthcare and legal protections. Early marriages and pregnancies are more common, affecting girls' education and future prospects. Government programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign aim to promote rural women's empowerment and education. NGOs and community-based initiatives are working at the grassroots level to improve infrastructure, provide vocational training, and raise awareness about women's rights. Overcoming this divide requires a holistic approach that improves rural infrastructure, ensures equal access to services, and promotes local leadership.

4. Cultural Heritage and Modernization

India's diverse cultural traditions are vital to its identity, with women often playing key roles as custodians of arts, crafts, and customs. Balancing cultural preservation with

modernization presents a nuanced challenge. While some traditional practices reinforce gender stereotypes and limit women's mobility and decision-making, they also serve as avenues for empowerment, economic independence, and social recognition. Globalization and changing ideas about gender roles have created tensions between tradition and progress. Many women are embracing education, careers, and digital connectivity, sometimes facing resistance from conservative cultural norms. Nonetheless, numerous women actively work to preserve their cultural heritage through traditional crafts, music, and storytelling transforming these into sustainable livelihood opportunities. Fostering an environment where cultural traditions coexist with modern aspirations requires inclusive dialogue and sensitivity. Recognizing women's agency as both cultural custodians and agents of change can help build a society that values its heritage while progressing. Through education, legal reforms, community participation, and cultural dialogue, India can create an inclusive society where women's potential is fully realized.

Part IV: The Road Ahead – India's Future and Women's Influence

India is at a critical juncture, with rapid social, economic, and technological transformations shaping its future landscape. Women's roles are becoming increasingly central in this evolution, reflecting changing societal attitudes, policy initiatives, and grassroots activism. While challenges persist, emerging trends offer promising opportunities for inclusive growth, empowerment, and societal progress.

1. Evolving Trends and Future Outlook

Women are participating more actively in the economy and politics than ever before. Increasing numbers are entering the workforce, entrepreneurship, and leadership positions across sectors. Policies promoting women's employment, access to credit, and business opportunities are fuelling economic empowerment. The presence of women in legislative bodies is also growing, supported by reservations and affirmative action, with expectations of continued progress as societal norms shift. Digital technology and expanded access to education are transforming opportunities for women. The growth of the internet and mobile connectivity allows women from diverse backgrounds to access information, online learning, and financial services. This connectivity enhances their entrepreneurial efforts, social participation, and access to health and legal resources. Digital literacy initiatives and affordable smartphones are expected to further bridge gender gaps, enabling women to participate fully in the digital economy. Changing societal perceptions, especially among younger generations, are increasingly

challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Movements advocating gender equality, improved media representation, and educational reforms are fostering more equitable attitudes. Although uneven across regions, a more gender-sensitive outlook is gradually taking hold. **Social justice campaigns** such as #MeToo and other grassroots initiatives continue to amplify women's voices, hold institutions accountable, and influence policy debates, contributing to a more inclusive culture.

2. Policy and Community Initiatives

Government programs play a crucial role in shaping this future. Campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao seek to improve child survival and promote gender equality from early childhood, challenging gender biases. Initiatives like Make in India and Digital India aim to boost women's participation in manufacturing and digital sectors, providing platforms for economic independence. Reservations and affirmative policies in local governance and legislative bodies are designed to enhance women's political representation, ensuring their voices influence decision-making. These efforts, combined with legal reforms and schemes focused on healthcare, education, and social welfare, are creating a supportive environment for women's empowerment. Consistent implementation and scaling are essential to turn these frameworks into tangible societal improvements.

3. Grassroots Movements and Women-Led Organizations

While institutional policies are vital, grassroots activism and women-led NGOs are equally important in transforming social norms, especially within marginalized communities. These organizations work directly with women facing social and economic disadvantages, providing education, healthcare, legal aid, and platforms for civic participation. Women's collectives are instrumental in challenging harmful customs like child marriage, dowry, and domestic violence, fostering community resilience and cultural change from within. For example, women's groups in rural areas have successfully advocated for better healthcare access and alternative livelihood options, empowering women to become local leaders. The strength of these grassroots movements lies in their deep understanding of local contexts and their ability to mobilize community support, creating a ripple effect that drives societal change and inspires future generations.

4. Overcoming Persistent Challenges

Despite promising trends, significant hurdles remain. Patriarchal attitudes, deeply ingrained cultural norms, and social practices continue to restrict women's autonomy

and reinforce stereotypes. Violence against women including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and trafficking remains widespread and demands ongoing legal and societal action. Socio-economic inequalities disproportionately impact women from marginalized backgrounds, limiting their access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach policy reforms, awareness campaigns, and cultural shifts that promote gender equality. Education is particularly powerful in transforming mindsets and fostering respect for women's rights. Engaging men and boys as allies is essential for sustainable change. Building inclusive institutions and fostering accountability are ongoing priorities. India's future holds great potential for women's empowerment and societal transformation. Through leveraging emerging trends, strengthening policies, empowering grassroots initiatives, and addressing ongoing challenges, the country can build a more equitable, inclusive, and progressive society where women are recognized as vital drivers of change.

Conclusion

India's society and cultural landscape are continually evolving, shaped by innovation, tradition, and external influences. Over the last fifteen years, notable progress has been made toward greater inclusion, gender equality, and preservation of cultural identity. Women have played a central role in this journey, contributing to social continuity and change through increased participation in education, politics, the economy, and activism. Their achievements demonstrate a transformative shift toward a more equitable future for India. Nonetheless, challenges related to social inequalities, safety, and balancing tradition with modernity remain. Collective efforts from policymakers, civil society, and individuals are critical to unlocking women's full potential and maintaining the strength of India's diverse cultural fabric. India's future success depends on inclusive development, women's empowerment, and resilient communities. With sustained commitment, the nation can realize its vision of a harmonious, progressive society that celebrates its heritage while embracing change.

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