
UNIT 7 ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN INDIA*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you would be able to:

- Understand the meaning of ethnicity in India;
- Identify the issues/problems involved in the ethnic movement;
- Know the approaches to ethnic movement
- Analyze the major ethnic movements in India

7.1 INTRODUCTION

India is a multi- ethnic, multi- religious, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic country where national unity is given priority. Different ethnic groups have been asserting

their ethnic rights and privileges through different types of movements. Ethnic movements in Assam, Punjab, North-East states, West Bengal and Kashmir have created a separate consciousness for the minorities to establish their identity in these states. Some ethnic movements are democratic and peaceful while others are separatist movements engaged with ethnic violence. So ethnicity has been a prime issue in nation and Nation-State.

The term ethnicity has been a popular term in academic discourse which refers to ascriptive identities like caste, language, religion, region etc. The term *Ethnicity* was first used by the French nationalist and scientist, Georges Vacher de la Pougé, in 1896 to describe the “natural and counterfeit” cultural, psychological and social characteristics of a population, and in order to distinguish the latter from the concept of race which he defined as a series of physical characteristics (Vacher de la Pougé, 1896). The term ethnic has Latin and Greek origins – *ethnīcus* and *ethnikas* both meaning *nation*. Etymologically, ethnicity refers to a band of people (nation) living together who share and acknowledge common customs. Ethnicity refers to social traits like nationality, tribe, and religious faith, shared language, shared culture, and shared traditions that are shared by a human population.

7.2 THE CONCEPT OF "ETHNICITY"

International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines ethnic group as ‘a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be, bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture’. They form their group when they are denied their rights, liberties and equality by the majority group. The members are physically and socially isolated from the larger community.

Ghosh (2003) defines Ethnicity as *"the process of formation and reformation of consciousness of identity (real or supposed) in terms of one or more social-cultural-political symbols of domination/subjugation of a group(s) or community by another that emerge out of the processes of assimilation, acculturation, interaction, competition and conflict"*. T.K. Oommen opines that the ethnic group is a group of people who share a common history, tradition, language and life-style, but are uprooted from and/or unattached to a homeland. Ethnicity is a processes which creates a sense of ethnic consciousness among the members of an ethnic group and mobilizes the members of same caste, language and religion to articulate their economic and political interest.

Max Weber writes: “ethnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 35).

7.3 ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity is determined at birth, inbuilt in human nature, and passed from generation to generation. Fredrik Barth (1969) argued that ethnic identity was a means to create boundaries that enabled a group to distance themselves from

one another. Barth was quite forceful about his position as he strongly maintained that ethnic boundaries define a group and not the “cultural stuff that encloses it” (Sollars, 1996, p. xxii).

Rajni Kothari, an eminent social scientist (1988) has argued that the process of formation of ethnic identity gets momentum when domination of the majority over the minority becomes an evident fact. Often, the dominant majority tries to assimilate and integrate the minority into the so-called mainstream. Kothari has therefore linked the ethnic movements in India with the movements of marginalised people and of those seeking indigenous authenticity. Pathy (2000) also equally argued that the Indian state has followed the western model of nation-state and undermined tribal identities. It has also deprived them of much of their land, livelihood, language, religion and culture. The western assumption of nation-state as a melting pot leading to a homogeneous national culture has not proved to be a myth. The tribal, non-tribal or Hindu-Muslim interactions in India did not result in the extinction of any particular culture in India. The massive presence and relevance of minority (and majority too) identity groups in India is a lesson for us.

Oommen (1997) analyzes that the success of any ethnic identity movement also depends to a large extent on the manner in which state and union government handles it.. There is enormous evidence to suggest that demands have been conceded by the state only when the concerned movement demonstrates its political clout. For instance, the demand for a separate state or administrative unit in the whole of North East India, Punjab, Darjeeling, Uttarakhand or Jharkhand was not conceded till those movements achieved political significance. But in doing so, the state has perpetuated conflicting situations indirectly and contributed to the proliferation of similar movements. The success of Mizo or Naga revolt in the North East had inspired all other groups of the area to launch similar kind of movement. All the major insurgent groups of North East today maintain underground linkages so as to exert greater pressure on the Indian State. The static response, thus, paradoxically becomes a catalytic agent for the emergence of ethnic movements. Even when the state tries to manage tensions through cooption of the movement’s leadership, the attempt backfires in the long run by giving birth to a new leadership aspiring for a better placement. In the case of Tripura, the process of ‘concessional democracy’ for more than two decades became counterproductive as terrorism has gradually become an ‘industry’ with contending political parties wooing this or that rebel group (Ghosh 2003).

Veena Das (1990) and Imitiaz Ahmad (1984) show how economic and political rivalries fuel communal tensions and movements. In the Shah Bano case elites and professional communalists contributed to the fabrication and distortion of identities (Zoya Hasan 1989). In all these cases, the symbolic and cultural aspect of ethnicity and communalism depended on political expression and mobilization for their outburst. Writing some 60 years ago Nehru rightly projected that ‘the communal problem is not a religious problem, it has, nothing to do with religion’ (quoted from T.N. Madan 1993: 550). The articulation of ethnic identity and assertion in India primarily takes the following forms:

7.4 FORMS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ASSERTION

There are six forms ethnic identity and assertion in India. These are discussed below

7.4.1 Linguistic Ethnicity

Language has always been a cornerstone of ethnic identity. Every ethnic group has its own language and the members of ethnic group build their ethnic identity through their own language. The Dravida Kazhagam movement took shape in Tamil Nadu in 1940s and 1950s. In this movement there was a strong opposition from the Dravidian language speakers against the adoption of Hindi as the national language by the government of India. Vanaik (1990) says linguistic ethnicity came into existence in India along with the growth of the national movement. He argued that unlike religion, linguistic consciousness is never a powerful contender for separate nationhood because for most Indians, linguistic consciousness co-exists non-antagonistically with national consciousness. Oommen (1990) writes comparing language and religion, he says that language has more legitimacy than religion for administrative restructuring.

7.4.2 Communalism

The concept of religious assertion and communalism has posed a great danger to the national integration. When ethnic groups try to establish their identity through religion, they breed conflict and threaten the community life. History reads that communalism has been a major source of communal conflict in the country. Bipan Chandra holds that communalism in India is a modern phenomenon. It has its roots in British imperialism and emerged out of modern politics based on mass mobilization and imaginary communal interests. The British policy of “divide and rule” in India sowed the seeds of antagonism and distrust between the Hindus and the Muslims so deep that the process of bridging the chasm between the two communities is still far from over.

There has been a constant conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India owing to the interest of both the communities to establish their religious dominance. The Sikh riots in 1984, Gujarat violence in 2002, Hindu –Muslim clashes in Ayodhya in 1992 have witnessed several communal riots and caused the loss of several innocent lives across the country.

7.4.3 Tribal Movements

Tribals are the indigenous groups who lived in the forest land. They have been historically neglected and ruthlessly oppressed at the hands of the landlords, money lenders and government officials. They have been displaced from their land, as a result of for which they have lost their livelihood resulting in huge dissatisfaction among them. They developed hatred towards the non-tribals (DIKUS) who grabbed their parental land and displaced them from their own *jal*, *jungle* and *jameen*. They have been in a fight with the mainstream people. The tribals continued their movement to assert their ethnic identity. The maverick tribal leaders from Oraon, Mundas, Maikda tribe etc., in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand and North-East India fought against the imperial rulers to protect their lives and livelihood. After independence, the tribal movements were directed for

maintaining cultural identity or for demanding a separate state or for asserting their status as caste Hindus through Sanskritization process.

7.4.4 Ethno-Nationalism

The problem of ethno nationalism did not get much attention from the international studies because many theorists considered that this problem is not a major threat to international peace. But it gained momentum in internal national studies. According to Walker, the concept “denotes both the loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and the loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state, particularly where the latter is conceived as a nation-state. In ethno-nationalism, a group develops a loyalty to its nation which is marked by the desire of an ethnic community and the community to have absolute authority over its own political, economic, and social affairs. This denotes the pursuit of statehood on the part of an ethnic nation.

K N Panikkar (2011) writes that periodically ethnic identities and loyalties surfaced in Indian polity, using different strategies and methods. Unfortunately, the state responded to the aspirations of these marginalised groups by methods that relied more on force, and this led to greater alienation of these communities. Ethnic conflict takes place when mobilized identity groups struggle for autonomy and power in an established nation or a newly formed state.

7.4.5 Regionalism

Regionalism refers to a blind loyalty towards one's own region. Regionalism helps to form ethnic groups and develop ethnic consciousness to assert their right based on a particular region. India has many ethnic differences and these ethnic differences create solid ground for regional feelings which invites danger to national integration. Due to strong movements, the union government responded to recognize union territories like Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and other North-eastern territories to the status of state. Goa became a state in 1987. The movements for the three new states (created in 2000)—Chhattisgarh out of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand out of Bihar and Uttarakhand out of Uttar Pradesh—were long-drawn but became vigorous in the 1990s. And the most recent one, is that which led to the division of Andhra Pradesh, creating a separate Telangana state, a movement which started in the 1950s.

7.4.6 Casteism

Casteism is a blind group loyalty towards one's own caste or sub-caste. It works for the social, economic, political and other interests of its own group. Beteille (1992: 51) argues that within the broader frame of ethnicity, caste has a rather ambiguous position. The caste system may be viewed as a particular case of ethnic differentiation. Caste plays a very important role in Indian politics. The Bahujan Samaj Party (a Dalit based party) in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Rashtriya Janta Dal (a party of intermediate castes) in the state of Bihar have reflected the dominance of caste politics in India. Now the caste groups are sharing common interests and share common socio-cultural traits to strengthen their solidarity. Stephen Barnett (1975) refers “the modern transformation of caste to ethnicization” (Reddy 2005: 547).

Commenting on caste-based ethnicity, Rudolph and Rudolph (1967: 32-36) hold that in a representative democracy like India, numerical strength is of great

significance. It is in the interest of all castes to come together. That is why there is a spurt in caste associations and caste federations. Rudolph and Rudolph calls these associations “para communities”. These para communities enable caste members to come together and pursue social mobility and economic gains and political power collectively. According to Reddy (2005: 547), and for Susan Bayly (1999), the ethnic character of caste lies in its becoming an urgent moral mandate in Independent India, a bond of collective virtues and obligations on the basis of which public-spirited people should take decisive action when they hear the call to arms”.

7.5 FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR ETHNIC UPSURGE IN INDIA

For Rajni Kothari (1988) ethnic upsurges are a consequence of the homogenising trend of modern states and of their technological/educational imperatives. A host of social scientists have also suggested that while culture and cultural variations are not completely irrelevant in the study of ethnicity, political processes have greater impact on such formation. For Dipankar Gupta (2003), ethnicity is basically a political process. Cohen (1974) has also argued that ethnicity does not require a cultural or historical explanation; contemporary politics and ‘structural conditions’ are the keys to understand the phenomenon.

Priya Arya (2016) explains some of the critical factors responsible for inflamed ethnicity in India:

- 1) India is a plural society. It is characterized by a large diversity in its population with multitudes of castes and several religious, linguistic, cultural and racial groups living here. Because of intense competition for scarce economic resources and the heightened consciousness among people of different groups to preserve their age-old cultures, India has always been vulnerable to assertions of ethnic identities.
- 2) Lopsided economic development of the country because of which some groups feel that they have been marginalised and completely left behind in the process of development, makes them highly susceptible to the politics of ethnicity.
- 3) Representative parliamentary democracy in India where different ethnic groups (castes, religious groups, linguistic groups etc.) compete for political power by stressing on horizontal solidarity and consolidation of shared interests.
- 4) Increasing politicization of caste and religion: Caste and religious identities are often whipped up by political leaders to mobilize people for their vested interests and petty political mileage.
- 5) Fear among minorities (both linguistic and religious) that they might get assimilated into the dominant culture, leading to the dilution of their cultural heritage. Hence, there is an increasing stress on ethnic identity to forge horizontal solidarity. Such feelings have also increased because of the process of globalization and cultural homogenization occurring everywhere. Cultural globalization is causing even the Hindu majority to assert itself and is spawning Hindu revivalism in India.

- 6) Intense feeling of alienation among the tribes of India because of faulty development policies, leading to forced displacement from their age-old habitats, lands and forests reducing them to abject poverty.

7.6 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO ETHNIC MOVEMENT

There are mainly four approaches to the study of ethnicity. These approaches are respectively discussed below

7.6.1 Primordialist Approach

The primordialist approach believes that ethnicity is based on primordial ties. This theory argues that “ethnic groups exist due to the traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects. The members are bound by common blood, descent, ancestors, family, belonging, roots and solidarity.

According to Barth (1969) this is a ‘taken-for-granted’ model of ethnicity and it has four theoretical features:

- i) Ethnic groups are biologically self-perpetuating;
- ii) Members of this group share basic cultural values manifest in overt cultural forms;
- iii) The group is a bounded social field of communication and interaction; and
- iv) Its members identify themselves and are identified by others as belonging to that group.

McKay (1982) suggests that though this approach can account for the emotional strength of ethnic bonds, it tends to be deterministic and static. It assumes that members of ethnic groups have little choice about their sense of attachment. As against such a view, ethnographic evidences suggest that ethnic identification is not given, static or trans-historical. They are rather fluid and in a state of flux. Mere membership of a group does not transform a social category into a ‘subjectively self-conscious community’. According to Paul Brass (1991), certain primordial attachments like language, kinship, or caste are variable. Again, migration may create new attachments with land. Instrumentalists like Brass also argue that ethnic attachments do not necessarily belong to non-rational part of human personality.

7.6.2 Instrumental Approach

This approach believes that one can change one’s ethnic identity for political or economic reason to get benefit. One prefers to accept the ethnic identity which gives him more benefits. This approach argues that ethnic identity is created and maintained by the individual to obtain social, political and material advantages.

This approach is the brainchild of Fredrik Barth (1969), who argued that “ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. Weber argues ethnicity is a consequence of collective political actions rather than its cause. Even though an ethnic group appears to be a particular form of status group for Weber, he did argue that possibilities for collective action rooted in ethnicity are ‘indefinite’.

Barth, in his "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" (1969) has accentuated that ethnic identity is generated, confirmed or transformed in the course of interactions. Ethnicity is a relational concept as it takes at least 'two' to be ethnic. Ethnicity is also a matter of politics, decision making and goal-orientation. The shift from a static to an interactional approach was carried on further to argue that people can and do shift as well as alter their ethnic ascriptions in the light of circumstances and environment. Following the same logic, Paul Brass (1991) has argued that ethnicity arises out of specific types of interactions and competition among the elites. Ethnic identity formation is seen by him as a process in the dynamics of elite competition and manipulation.

7.6.3 Modernization Approach

The modernization approach to ethnicity believes that due to influence of modernization, the attachment to primordial loyalty to ethnic groups will decline. The identity groups are a temporary phenomenon. The ethnic identity will be assimilated with modern nation state due a shift from traditional society to a modern one. The modern phenomena like industrialization, nationalism and capitalism are undermining the importance of ethnic identity. The emergence of global modern state will affect the structure and function of ethnic group and will sideline the cultural differences gradually.

Gupta (1996) exemplifies that the Punjab agitation, which began with some secular demands like Chandigarh as capital of Punjab, water sharing between Punjab and Haryana and territorial tribunal to settle the dispute was ethnicised by the Central Government and the Congress Party for political gains.,

7.6.4 Social Constructionist Approach

Ethnicity is a social construct that divides people into different groups based on the attributes like physical appearance, cultural backgrounds, and ancestral heritage.

Jenkins (1997: 40) has identified four elements of this model:

- a) ethnicity emphasizes cultural differences
- b) ethnicity is cultural;
- c) ethnicity is to some extent variable and manipulable; and
- d) ethnicity as a social identity is both collective and individual, externalised and internalised.

The ethnic meanings and collective identities change in form and content as circumstances change. Cultural traditions as boundary markers are, therefore, 'invented' and put into place according to selective agendas whose rationale is entirely determined by contingent circumstances (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

7.7 MAJOR ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Ethnic differences generate ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict has been a social identity issue. Ethnic conflict arises due to non fulfillment of economic and political need of ethnic groups. When the ethnic groups are apprehensive about their existence they resort to conflict which results in ethnic violence. As Vesna

Pesic, a professor at the University of Belgrade said, ‘ethnic conflict is caused by the “fear of the future”, lived through the past.

India has witnessed several ethnic movements which are respectively stated below

7.7.1 Ethnic Movement in Punjab

The Khalistan movement was carried out by a section of Sikhs to create a separate Sikh country. The movement got intensified in the Punjab in 1970s and continued till the early 1990s. A group of Sikh leaders started demanding more autonomy for the state before the Central government. They demanded a separate country, Khalistan. In June 1984, due to violence the Indian Government ordered a military operation, *Operation Blue Star* to clear Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar and thirty other Gurdwaras (Sikh Place of Worship) of armed terrorists who were resorting to violence in Gurudwaras

Indira Gandhi, the then Indian Prime Minister was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards which resulted in thousands of Sikhs being massacred in 1984 in anti-Sikh riots. Subsequently Punjab insurgency saw several secessionist militant groups becoming active in Punjab, supported by a section of the Sikh movement. Indian state controlled the insurgency in the early 1990s.

7.7.2 Ethnic Movement in North-East

There are several ethnic movements in the North-east region. In this region large number of tribal people have not been assimilated with the mainstream culture due to physical inaccessibility, socio-linguistic and religious distinctiveness. Majority of them are converted to Christianity. The first tribal group, the Nagas began a movement for an independent state. After a long struggle they succeeded in creating a separate state as Nagaland in 1963. Similarly second ethnic problem with tribals of North East is that of Mizos. Mizos also continued their struggle to get autonomy by establishing a separate state following which Mizoram's status of Union territory was changed to statehood.

7.7.3 Ethnic Movement in Gorkhaland

The recent ethnic movement in India is the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling which demands a separate state of Gorkhaland. Subash Ghising formed the Gorkha National Liberation Front in 1980. Ghising's main demand was for a new state of Gorkhaland for India's Nepali-speaking citizens. He resorted to violence and scare tactics. He also planned to create a “Greater Nepal”. This movement was supported by Nepal with the demands that Indian-origin people get Nepali citizenship in the Terai. Bimal Gurung, a leader of the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha has been trying to ignite Gorkha anger and emotions to achieve the goal of a separate state. He propagates that Gorkhaland is our birth right. We will not budge one step from this demand.

7.7.4 Dravidian Movement

The Self respect movement or Dravidian Movement began in 1925 under the maverick leadership of E.V Ramasamy. The objective of this movement is to achieve a society where backward castes have equal human rights, and encouraging backward castes to have self-respect. The two major concepts of Self-Respect Movement were Anti-Brahmanism and Self-Respect Marriages.

The Justice Party was formed in the Madras Presidency of British India in 1916. It mainly focused on removing Brahmins from the higher positions. Gradually, the non-Brahmin replaced the Brahmins in every sphere and destroyed the monopoly over education and the administrative services which the Brahmins had previously held. In 1947, when India attained independence, Periyar called for members of the Dravida Kazhagam to boycott the celebrations. According to him, the Indian National Congress was dominated by Brahmins. He predicted that an independent India would bring South Indians, especially Tamils, under the dominance of Brahmins and North Indians. The leadership of the movement argued that imposition of the North Indian Hindi language, Brahminical Hindu religion and Aryan culture were detrimental to the development of the Dravidian identity. Therefore, the Tamil ethnic movement had demanded, stopping of the imposition of Hindi language secession from India.

7.7.6 Ethnicity in Assam

The conflict between indigenous Bodo tribals and ethnic Bengali Muslim settlers began in Assam in 1952, with subsequent violent clashes occurring in 1979-1985, 1991-1994, and 2008. In 2012 the riots and violence between Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims erupted in the districts of Kokhrajhar, Chirang, and Dhubri. In this violence 77 people were killed and over 400,000 displaced from the violence, including both Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims. The Bodos resented the Bangladeshi immigration due to the consequent loss of land and cultural identity. After the riots there have been widespread protests across the northeast demanding “early detection and deportation” of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. The Bodos have established relationship with other indigenous tribal communities in Assam to collectively address the issue. Similarly the All Bodoland Muslim Student’s Union (ABMSU) has threatened to declare jihad and take up arms against the state.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below to answer the question
 ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit

1) What is Ethnicity?

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2) What is Ethnic Identity?

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3) What are the theoretical approaches to understand Ethnicity?

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4) What are the major Ethnic movements in India?

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7.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit the concept of ethnicity is defined. 'Ethnicity' has been a popular concept in academic discourse. The concept 'ethnic identity' is well explained. The members of an ethnic group are bound by common language, common history, common culture and common territory to build their ethnic identity. Again different approaches to ethnic movement such as Primordialist approach, Instrumentalist approach, and modernization approach are discussed to understand the concept of ethnicity. India has witnessed different major ethnic movements. Ethnic movements in North east states, Assam, Kashmir, Punjab and ethno-politics in Uttar Pradesh are explained in this unit.

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7.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Ethnicity is a concept referring to a shared culture and way of life. It is recognized by common language, religion, material culture such as clothing and food, and cultural products such as music and art. Ethnicity creates social solidarity and social conflict in the society.
- 2) Ethnic identity is different from personal identity. It refers to ethnic awareness, ethnic self identification, ethnic attitudes and ethnic behaviours. The members of an ethnic group are identified for their group thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior.
- 3) The Primordialist theory argues that “ethnic groups exist due to the traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects. The members are bound by common blood, descent, ancestors, family, belonging, roots and solidarity. The instrumentalist approach believes that one can change his ethnic identity for political or economic reason to get benefit. The modernization approach to ethnicity believes that due to influence of modernization, the attachment to primordial loyalty to ethnic group will decline. The identity groups are temporary phenomenon.
- 4) India has witnessed different major ethnic movements. The ethnic movements in Kashmir, Punjab, north eastern states, and the Bodo ethnic movement demanded a separate statehood by building a separate ethnic identity.

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GLOSSARY

Race: Race is widely considered as a basis of categorization of human beings in various categories depending upon their physical features. However, since race is a social construct, this categorization of human being is socially based and categorized.

Ethnic group: Ethnic group is a group of people who share common history, language, cultural, heritage, and connectivity with a common myth of origin.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity is the sense of belongingness of an individual or group to a particular ethnic group.

Primordial : Existing from the beginning. That is why it is said to be very basic. For example, identity to one's group by way of language, ethnic stock etc. is primordial because it seems to have always existed.

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