

WOMEN ON THE MOVE



Women holding rifles parading the streets — photo: Rashid Talukder

The Unsung Heroines of 1971

by Zaheda Ahmad

It was, we all know and recognise to be, a total war that we fought in 1971 to liberate ourselves from a hated colonial rule. Barring a small section of misguided, self-seeking or reactionary elements, all of us irrespective of class, creed, age or sex participated, in one form or another, in that war while countless thousands took up arms to fight the enemies all over the land millions of others eagerly came forward to serve as collaborators in the second but equally important line of defence. They thus provided food, shelter and medicine to the freedom fighters on the move, took to nursing the wounded ones and still others worked as secret couriers, informers and spies. Again on the propaganda front many acted as news readers, programmers and entertainers at the newly established Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bengal Radio Centre). Indeed many and varied were the activities of the members of a bitterly hostile population almost everyone of whom became an instant freedom fighter.

This noble enterprise thus crossed even that crucial gender divide which had been and still is such a permanent feature of our society. Still the most common roles that we see our womenfolk filling in are those of the long suffering bereaved mothers, wives, daughters and sisters who had lost their near and dear ones in that titanic struggle. Occasionally we see them being honoured at State or private functions or getting interviewed or written about in the media on relevant days. Not everybody could secure a place in public affection as did the late Jahanara Imam. And yet all of them sacrificed dearly and suffered horribly for the sake of a nation's emancipation. Many are the mothers and wives who felt honoured by sending their sons and husbands to the front although that fact does not make their losses more bearable. Not everybody can make such a deliberate choice. Thousands more including the cream of our intelligentsia were butchered by the occupation forces and their abominable local collaborators. The saddest part of the tale lies in our cool, calculated efforts at rehabilitating these war criminals instead of bringing them to justice. By any stretch of imagination can it ever be a proper way of showing respect either to the martyrs or to those whom they had left behind?

There is yet another category of women who are readily mentioned as one of the war's worst affected groups. Yes, they are the cruel victims of large scale rape committed by the occupation forces. We have heard a lot about them and in a vain effort to offer some verbal solace to these terribly wronged members of humanity we had designated them as our "Heroic Women". But how many of us have come across a significant number of these unfortunate women? No, given the prevailing social climate that is out of the question. So as a group they have so far remained almost invisible and elusive. Society, in spite of all its patriotic effervescence, has not given them a fair deal so much so that we hardly know or hear anything about them anymore.

Similarly we know very little about the thousands of our women who worked quietly from homes spread across the land in cities, towns, villages and hamlets. Being the members of a poor, conservative, and mostly illiterate society and engaged in a life and death struggle with a brutal army of occupation that put a very low price on rules of civilised conduct our women collaborators

did not have the resources, articulation or inclination to cherish a high profile image of themselves. Hardly any of them did or could keep any records or afterward come forward with stories of their activities. This is why there is such a paucity of materials on the basis of which a detailed account of their involvement could be prepared.

In this connection one may refer to the case of Selina Parveen, the author-turned-journalist who was kidnapped and murdered by the Al-Badr gangs on 13 December, 1971 along with scores of our other intellectuals. As a young journalist, separated from her husband, Selina lived with her child in a quiet corner of Dhaka. Here, the life of a divorced or a deserted woman is a hard one. A male-dominated society accords scant respect to such a woman however qualified or gifted she may be. Naturally, socially Selina kept mostly herself to herself; but when the call came she threw away all her cautions and

joined wholeheartedly in the struggle for Bengal's liberation. A spirited woman that she was she never knew how to compromise on matters of principle. And compromise she never did giving up her job many times whenever there was a conflict.

A published poet she used to edit a journal named "Shilalipi" besides contributing columns to other papers also. Imagine a woman in the 60s always in straitened circumstances who lived in a rented apartment with no other male or female relations save her infant child and adolescent brother inhabiting a hostile society in a city that had yet to grow out of its semi rural socio-cultural mind-set. She hardly had any friends but critics galore.

As for politics, she was a left-leaning progressive intellectual who maintained quite a close liaison with a number of leftist political leaders some of whom were known to have taken refuge — whenever they

needed it — at her home. But above all she had a firm belief in the innate goodness of human beings. When the war came, she used to help the freedom fighters in every possible means at her disposal. That in the end made her a prime target in the hit list of the Al-Badr gangs. Her mutilated body was found, along with those of the others, in the Rayerbazar graveyard.

By all accounts, Selina Parveen was a remarkable person who in any other civilised society would have found a place of pride in the rolls of national heroes and heroines. But here she has so far remained an unsung and unlamented person fit only for a passing reference on 14 December. A tribute to her quiet, unpretentious character that always preferred to keep a low-profile in an unkind but noisy society.

The writer who teaches history at Dhaka University is the editor of 'Sapthagik Samoy', a viewsweekly.

Tiwana: 'Daughter of Democracy'

by Raffat Binte Rashid

Of the colour of skin, class and creed matter, when it comes to important issues like human rights violation or other such matters? Man and woman are humans first and their religion or nationality are just like tag numbers for them. So by obvious choice humans should stand on one platform to voice their demands and get their rights established. At least this is what Raheela Tiwana, advisor to the chief minister of Sindh, Pakistan, for social welfare prefers to believe in and work for.

Tiwana, recently visited Dhaka to attend the SAARC technical committee meeting on women in development. "Women all over the globe are related to us, they are our sisters, irrespective of their origin and it is natural for us — the educated women, to stand on a common ground and work together to improve the lot of womankind," she stresses one of the reasons of her visit here, while speaking at a reception hosted by Hasna J Maudud, President of The National Association for Resource Improvement (NARI).

"Men and women are equal in the eyes of God, at least this is what we see in Hajj. I see no reasons why our women of today should stay back while the world or rest of her country is growing and moving forward," she comments. She adds that if women educate themselves, they will, not only be able to contribute to the creation of a bold and educated generation but also secure their rights as well.

Vibrant and courageous Tiwana, who started her political career with the struggles of 1984, worked for restoration of democracy and was named daughter of democracy by the Prime Minister of Pakistan for remarkable services to the cause of democracy. In her speech at the meeting she also informed that a number of

most of these detained women decline to come out of jails or return to Bangladesh as they are afraid that they would be again caught and put back to human slavery or won't be accepted by their families here," she says. Recently some of these girls have been rehabilitated in hostels that are being made in Lahore and Karachi.

Tiwana, a young, hard-working, sincere political worker, thinks that the scheme formulated in keeping with the spirit of SAARC action programme on women's development should be implemented

in the member countries. They have already introduced new programmes at the grassroots level by opening home school scheme and chapter schools and also making way for employment. "In my country the age limit for women in government services have been relaxed from 32 to 35. There are already, many women working in every development centre and all stand together when it comes to common problems of womankind." A massive development programme has been undertaken in Pakistan to bring about economic and social emancipation of women, she relates.

"Women in Pakistan have now been undergoing a lot of changes, since our present Prime Minister came to power and we are looking forward to a golden future," she expresses her optimism. It is at this point that she favours a good generation. She also suggested that there should be an exchange programme, where women around the world should meet together and stand on one platform to voice their concern. Government and NGO's involved with women development activities should take part in this," she says and agrees with Hasna Maudud to form a common agenda of women in the SAARC region.

Tiwana met with Grameen Bank officials and visited Manikganj to see BRAC's Ayesha Abed Foundation where she visited BRAC school, poultry and livestock, restaurants owned and run by women and women's carpentry and leather workshop. She also visited the jail here, went to Kalyani school of handicapped children. She also met with Minister of Youth and Sports Sadeq Hussain and showed keen interest in exchange and exhibition programmes with Bangladesh. "We should be progressive and abandon old ways to work on common issues."



Women come forward to voice their protest — photo: Rashid Talukder

The Economist and Women in Islam

by Shah Abdul Hannan

the situation demands, one can divorce her husband. Though there is some procedural difference, both men and women have the right of divorce.

Spiritually, there is no difference between men and women. This is all the more evident from the following quotes of the Holy Quran:

1. Mankind! reverence your guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person (4:1). When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him My Spirit, Fall ye down in obeisance unto him (15:29). But He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His Spirit (32:9).

2. Mankind! We created you from a single (Pair) of male and female (49:13). And he that works a righteous deed —

Whether Man or Woman — and is a believer — such will enter the Garden (of Bliss): (40:40).

In Islam, the code of punishment is same for men and women. In the Holy Quran and Hadith, there is no differentiation in awarding punishment to men and women.

In this context, we would discuss the views expressed by the Economist. It did not put up entire and appropriate translation of verse No 34 of Sura Nisa. Translation given by the Economist — men have authority over women and that if women cause trouble they should be beaten.

It is not a complete and appropriate translation of the abovementioned verse. Here I could have presented translation from various sources. I would like to present only the translation given by Allama Yusuf Ali — which is well-reputed in Europe. The following is that translation:

"Men are protectors and maintainers of women..... as to those women on whose part you fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds (and last) beat them (lightly)".

What the Economist has omitted in the translation is this: "(first) admonish them and (next) refuse to share beds". What sort of integrity has been shown by the Economist by giving such a faulty translation of the Holy Quran? This Text of the Holy Quran is an exceptional, one

which is applicable to the women in the pre-divorce situation arising out of severe ill-conduct. This is not applicable in the normal circumstances.

The general rule of Islam in respect of treatment to women in society and family is succinctly expressed in the following verse of Sura Al-Nisa: O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit Women against their will. Nor should ye treat them With harshness, that ye may Take away part of the dower Ye have given them — except Where they have been guilty of open lewdness; On the contrary live with them On a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them It may be that ye dislike A thing, and Allah brings about

through it a great deal of good — Sura Al-Nisa (Verse 19)

The following quotes from Hadith also illustrate clearly the view of Islam in regard to the rights of women:

(a) Treat women with kindness. (Bukhair and Muslim, collection of Hadith)

(b) He is the perfect believer whose character and conduct is best and he is the best person among you who is very good to his wife (Tirmizi, collection of Hadith)

We know about the conduct of the Prophet (SM) to his wives and daughters and this conduct is the teaching of the prophet which Muslims are duty bound to follow. It may be mentioned here that the greatest material right of a woman is the right of getting maintenance from her husband and the greatest non-material right is to receive good treatment.

The aim of the principles of Islam is to thwart persecution of women as far as possible. It is best known to Allah that man, being the stronger partner in the family can put woman into trouble. In this context it has been postulated in the verse No 34 of Sura Nisa that first women should be admonished about their fault and then to remain separate from them temporarily and as a last resort to protect the family, they may be awarded light punishment. But Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon him) did not follow the last resort and has asked his followers to refrain from the same. He has said "Ye don't inflict physical torture on the (female) servants of God" (Abu Daud, collection of Hadith).

In Islam the right of inheritance of women is not less than that of men. This becomes all the more clear if it is remembered that in Islam woman has the right to get maintenance (food, clothing and lodging) from man (her husband). Islam has to be looked into in its entirety.

It has been mentioned at seven places in the Holy Quran about the matter of witness presented by women. In the verse from 6 to 9 of the Sura Nur, it has been said that witness presented by man and woman is equivalent. In five other places of the Holy Quran (4:15, 5:109, 24:4, 24:13 and 65:1) it has not been mentioned whether the witness should be a man or a woman. So their witness should be deemed to be equal. Only in

one place of the Holy Quran (financial contract for a limited period) — 2:282) it has been specified that call to witness by two men and if two men are not available, one man and two women.

In the view of the Islamic scholars, in the Islamic social framework woman generally are not in the centre of trade and commercial activities and as such their experience of trade and finance is relatively limited. For this reason, for the sake of precaution and for no other purpose the above provision has been made in the Quran.

There is evidence in the several Hadith collections like Abu Daud, Tirmizi and Nasai that Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon him) has taken decision on the basis of one person's witness and one person's oath. No mention of the gender of the witness has been made in these Hadith. (Ref: Dr Jamal A Badabi — Islamic teaching lecture series in audio and video).

It appears from these instances that no injustice has been done to women, rather in some cases they have been exempted from the responsibility of standing as witness.

It has already been mentioned earlier that there is no prohibition for a woman to work outside her house. As regards polygamy, I may mention that there are many books and articles in the subject. Further, polygamy in Islam is neither obligatory nor even recommended. Islam also did not invent polygamy. It was very much a part of Judaic-Christian tradition (ref: The Bible). It is barely permissible to solve some social and personal cases. Polyandry (one wife, many husbands) is not permissible for some negative effect.

Lastly, what the Economist has said against the Islamic Ulema is provocative. For any type of studies, we need the help of experts. To have a grasp on the vast field of Islamic laws, there is the need, to take help from Islamic experts who are called Ulema.

Those Ulema who possess real knowledge present no problem. The real problem is ignorance and bigotry. All sort of ignorance about Islam must be removed.

Women must be given their due right. Without any delay, there should be an end to all sorts of deprivations inflicted upon them so far. We have to do it without waiting for any provocation from the West.

Neither the women, nor the

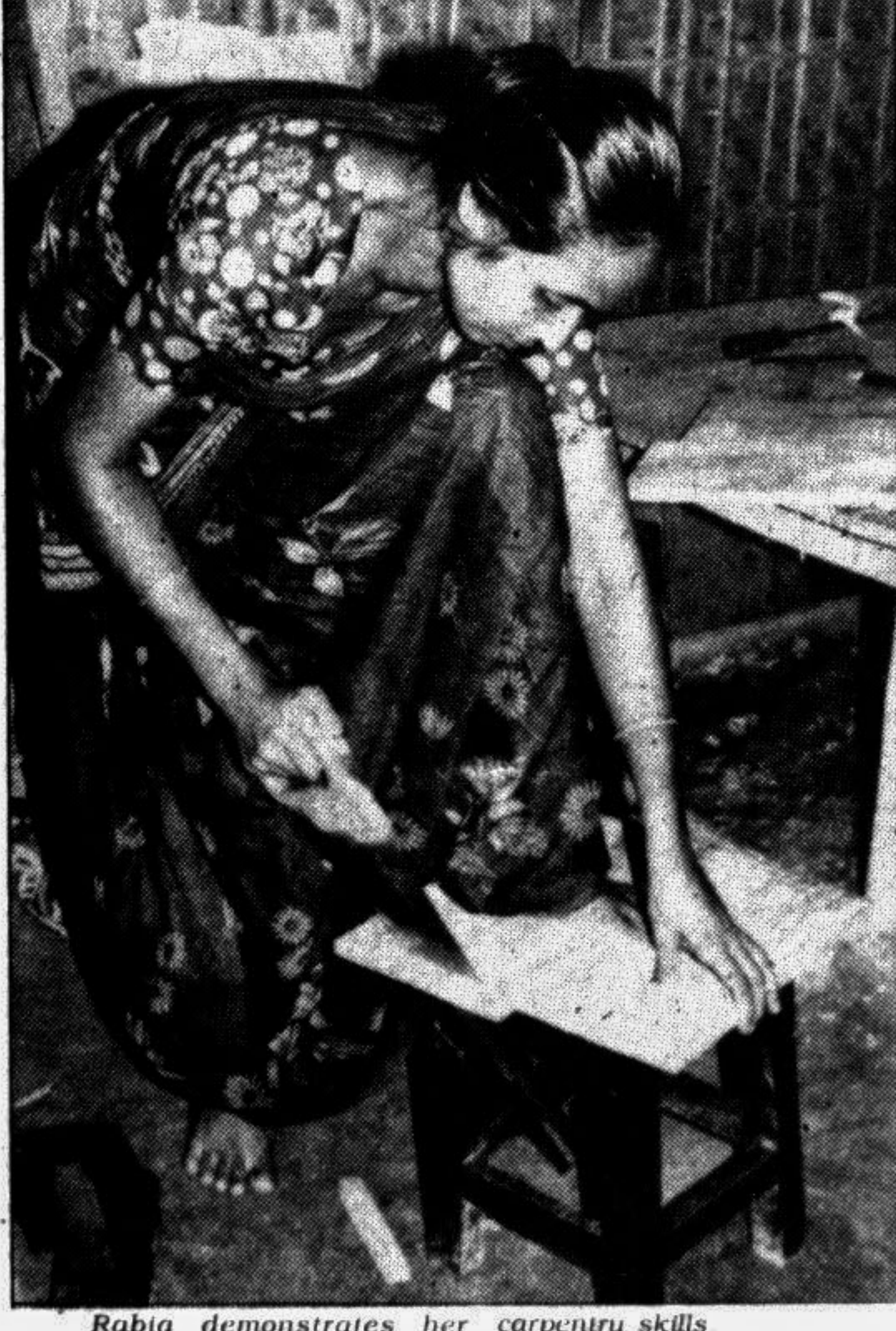
Breaking Down Gender Barriers

by A M Ahmed

WOMEN can do any job that men can do" states 40 year old Rabia, a widow with four children. This was no casual assertion but a simple statement of fact which she proceeded to demonstrate with her carpentry skills.

Rabia is one of 12 poor women who are undergoing one year's training in a craft previously considered solely a male preserve — carpentry. This workshop project called Unmesh is located on the roadside in Thakurgaon town. Organised by NGO Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), with the help of Japanese supporters, this is one of number of women's carpentry workshops set up in northern Bangladesh to develop the skills and income-earning capacity of poor women from rural areas.

As another trainee, Momena points out, "when we started six months' ago, it was hard because people used to make fun of us". They could not understand why or how women could become carpenters. The husbands of the trainees were also suspicious and accompanied their wives to the training for the first few days. Momena and the others persevered regardless. They realised that, despite the constraints, they had a rare chance to learn a useful skill that could improve their families living standard in future.



Rabia demonstrates her carpentry skills

customers for the good-quality furniture they produce, have any doubts now. Under the guidance of a experienced carpenter, they have progressed fast steadily acquiring the knowledge and practical skills needed to produce cabinets, beds, tables, wooden racks and a range of other household items. The women receive a basic allowance each day to cover their food costs but attendance is nearly 100 per cent because all see this as a way of earning a living. Most are landless whose husbands earn an uncertain living from casual labour.

As their carpentry skills develop, the project also focuses on developing their business acumen. Competition is introduced between groups, and training in running a carpentry business provided by RDRS experts. The women are already planning in two groups, to establish their own carpentry workshops when they finish their training. Anwara Begum explains "we plan to lease a site at the market where we can produce furniture and sell it".

As these 12 poor women realise, many of the barriers facing women are artificial and, with determination, can be overcome. By challenging these gender barriers to learn carpentry, these same women can provide a better living for their families.

The writer is associated with RDRS.

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