

## **Contesting The Dramatic Representation of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's new web series on Netflix: A Comparative Study with The Historical Reality**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a comparative study of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's latest Netflix series about the old red light Diamond Bazaar, alongside historical account of courtesans provided by Veena Talwar Oldenburg. Given the argument that Bhansali's dramatization has preferred a cinematic flair over what he stated the cultural and historical accuracy, the purpose of this fact-checking research is to verify accuracy of claims and information presented in Bhansali's dramatic representation of Heeramandi through the reliable historicist resources and evidences. In academic context, it is significant while warranting or disproving the integrity and reliability of the statements presented in Bhansali's series with the help of comparative method. Though Bhansali is popular for his elaborate narratives, nuanced characters, and opulent images, and his films frequently address representation and identity issues, yet his cinematic approach strikes a deep chord with viewers and sparks conversations that go beyond the realm of cinematic realities. The present dramatic series has been set to explore the cultural and historical context of Heera Mandi – a red-light district in Lahore; however, instead of documenting the facts, Bhansali has manipulated the cultural and historical demonstration of reality. Hence, this comparative view of the research concludes the inadequacy on director's part in revering and portraying the courtesans' culture and reducing them to only spectacle.

**Keywords:** Bhansali, Courtesans, Historical Facts, Web series, Netflix

### **Introduction**

#### **Impending Misrepresentations in Bhansali's Heeramandi**

Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar, television series created and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali is about the lives of courtesans in the old red-light district of Heera Mandi, Lahore during British Colonial Empire. Bhansali's dramatization of Heeramandi maintained more cinematic aptitude than to the historical and cultural facts. Instead of providing the facts about the inhabitants of Heeramandi—red light district in Lahore, regarding their socio-political evolution, their stories have been oversimplified and more romanticized. The place has its roots in cultural contexts of courtesans, the intricate dynamics of its culture has remained a dilemma when represented by Bhansali's dramatic characters. Rather than portraying them as cultural ambassadors with artistic values of dancing and singing, they have been portrayed as glamorous figures. Since the director has not explained how the arrival of the colonial masters in the 1940s worsened their situation and led to their marginalization in the nation (Mitra, 2020), and how they tried in every way to find their true position and dignity in society, this cultural poetics of the ideologies behind falsifying the facts is problematic in the drama series. Against the respect, they were relegated and fought against poverty. Mitra further states that intellectual Indians were also responsible to organize a modern culture and society in India by expelling the deviant characters. These facts are hardly presented in the dramatic version of the series and thus understated. Historically, they have been remained oppressed but they have been portrayed as relishing bodies under state's expense. Thus, the portrayal is not inclusive depicting precisely the time of colonialism and courtesans in the subcontinent. Theorists in Mass Media like Sasha Costanza-Chock also promotes the development of such technologies that put social justice, ethics, and human well-being first instead of as Bhansali's digital spaces have shown. It pushes designers/directors and main characters to think about how their formations will affect society as a whole (Costanza-Chock, 2022). In fact, it is not for the first time that Bhansali has grossly manipulated the facts but in the past, he has been involved in the same misrepresentation as in presenting the character of Alauddin Khilji in his Padmaavat (Kamran, 2018).

Bhansali represented an often misunderstood aspect of the history and culture of the courtesans of India; whereas Bhansali may be able to maintain a balance in artistic vision and inclusive storytelling what according to Arndt cited by Jackson is never just about constructing social or personal meanings; rather, it is a component of "the subjective in between" (Jackson, 2006), where a variety of private and public interests are constantly problematically at play. In doing so, he would have engaged with the complexities that were the core issues of the courtesans while probing back in history.

Looking back in history, it is evident that rather than showing sensationalism, courtesans reflected dignity while engaging in the skills of music, poetry and dance. The new codes of conduct imposed during British colonial period, in order to align with Victorian morality, drastically destroyed the status of these cultural icons working in their establishments

(Oldenburg, 1990). Looking into their representation in the drama series, it is also seen that Bhansali does not have covered the intersectionality of race, class, and culture and their challenges of socio-economic vulnerability; instead, he has covered the romantic image of the prostitute. Thus, his homogenous portrayal of these women's agency and not of the systemic exploitation and violence they face, leaves his representation as one side of the coin. Recognition of socio-economic realities is also significant, ignoring which leads to stereotypes, stigmatization, and misconceptions regarding these women.

This fact-checking research uses Greenblatt's concepts as a methodology to validate or refute the claims and information stated in Bhansali's Netflix series of Heeramandi with the historian's account given by Veena Talwar Oldenburg. Oldenburg has provided this account after extensive ethnographic research – by engaging with the women in this profession and by interviewing them, to make her perspective reliable. This has been further checked with the account given by Gupta Mitra, another historian. The study significantly contributes to maintain historical accuracy in such visual accounts which otherwise manipulate and thus misrepresent the historical facts. Moreover, missing an inclusive portrayal also questions the ethical responsibility of the director, and an unjust social treatment of the characters lived in the past. It also conveys that how cinematic flair is preferred instead of historical and cultural truths.

### **Literature Review**

Khan and Qadir in their study provide an expansive account of the historical presence of tawaifs in medieval and colonial India. By the end of the nineteenth century, when India was still a British colony, tawaifs were increasingly seen as being on par with whores, which caused the term to become less common. Their belongings given by the Mughal emperors were taken back by the colonial masters and with colonial baggage, they have been fallen from courtesans' grace to prostitutes (Khan and Qadir, 2024).

The culture and influence of courtesans were essentially erased when the term "prostitute" took over (Kidwai, 2004). In a similar vein, Oldenburg noted that colonial policies favored the selection of attractive prostitutes from salons, who were subsequently sent to European soldiers' cantonments for sex (Oldenburg, 1990).

In addition to dehumanizing their line of work, this put these women at risk for venereal diseases. They were frequently placed in quarantine in "lock hospitals" and subjected to routine medical examinations (Ghosh, 1994). While the 1869 Act imposed religious teachings, moral instruction, and hygienic practices, the 1864 Cantonment Act required stringent clinical evaluations and permitted the detention of women with infections (Bell, 1994). Expanding on Oldenburg's research, it is observed that these colonial powers not only changed sexual customs but also encountered opposition from a sizable class that had been shut out of royal social gatherings, upending the established prostitution systems (Gupta, 2001). These women are still working to recover their art and revive their culture after being uprooted from their roots (Kidwai, 2004).

Discussing criticism on the dramatic series directed by Bhansali, Maheen Humayun reviews the series, not that Bhansali did not do a lot right; the story is told by the women of Heeramandi, with the exception of Sharmin Segal, who plays Alamzeb. A transactional relationship that was ingrained in the fabric of society at the time, the arts were closely linked to social class and identity – the entertained on the one hand, and the courtesans and creators on the other. Regardless of how glamorously it is presented, the tawaifs and their adventures will never be forgotten (Humayun 2024).

Adding another view on Bhansali's drama serie Adil opines that courtesans wear couture, speak highfalutin Urdu, and live in opulent havelis with sparkling chandeliers and elegant artwork. Every frame is exquisite and meticulously detailed, which is not surprising considering Bhansali's penchant for making films that are larger than life. His series further claim that women in Heeramandi were just glamorous making the historical facts inaccurate. He also manipulates the architectural details as Badshahi mosque though located near Heera Mandi have been shown nowhere in the drama series (Adil, 2024).

### **Research Objectives**

1. To evaluate the precision of the historical and cultural representations in Bhansali's series and Veena Talwar Oldenburg's historical account of courtesans.
2. To analyze how the director's cinematic choices, affect the courtesans' actual image in his series Heeramandi and thus elaborate the chords between Bhansali's artistic approach and historical accuracy.

### **Research Questions**

1. What specific historical claims made by Bhansali in Heeramandi can be supported or challenged by reliable historical sources provided by Oldenburg?
2. How Does Bhansali's dramatization influence contemporary understandings of the social and cultural identities of courtesans in the context of his series Heeramandi?

### Theoretical Implications

This qualitative fact-checking study adopts comparative method (Lange, 2012) for verifying accuracy of claims put forward by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Stephan Greenblatt's given steps of contextualizing the cultural and social contexts under which a text (a drama serial in the present context) was produced, intertextuality, historical evidence, theatricality and performance (Greenblatt, 1980) guide as methodology for a rigorous analysis of the facts presented in the Bhansali's dramatic series and in historical evidences. While following Greenblatt's given concepts, Bhansali's social context is deeply rooted in Indian traditions where he belongs to the family which has rich braiding of music, dance, and performance that helps shaping him an elitist discourse. Though he celebrates varieties of Indian heritage, he, being an elite forgets to mention the worries of the people residing in red-light district of Heeramandi of 1940s. In his other drama, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) he portrays an empowered underworld character, who though is forced into prostitution yet later becomes an agent to speak for the rights of sex workers. That film also sparked controversy since in real life, sex workers are neither so empowered nor these marginalized characters are given voice in the context of subcontinent (Gangubai Kathiawadi, 2022). His dramatic series of *Heeramandi* can be taken as influential of *Gangubai* as well, showing the element of intertextuality. By employing intertextuality, he has given the aspect of courtesans' agency an extended shape in his new series *Heeramandi*. The interplay of Bhansali's material conditions and cultural influence has also allowed him to frame his works in such luxurious contexts and intricate stage designs what Greenblatt calls cultural materialism. However, Bhansali does not provide any historical accuracy of the details portrayed in his romanticized version of *Heeramandi*. Theatricality and performance of this dramatic series has set the audiences' reaction to criticize his work. If Bhansali had a rounded understanding of the past, his work would have better depicted the facts.

In order to enrich this theoretical dimension, Oldenburg perspective is also part of this section. Oldenburg starts her powerful thesis as "my purpose is to re-examine the shifting lifestyle of the courtesans of Lucknow from the time of the Awadh court, through the colonial period to the present day, to extract the ideology which informs their concealed subversion of gender roles. She states that according to records, some of these women also paid taxes, indicating that they were well-off enough to be respected rather than subject to regulations. She writes that particularly within the subaltern school, "the historiographical and methodological limitations of such studies" have overlooked the invisible activism in the domestic sphere, where women create and employ clandestine tactics to oppose and subvert the oppression and tedium of the typical patriarchal household". As she writes, "I found myself engaged in garnering their self-perceptions as powerful, independent, even subversive women, while I observed and learned about their way of life, rituals, and celebration of womanhood in the privacy of the kotha –salon/upper-story apartments, and their liberation from the rules of the patriarchal world beyond their own walls" (Oldenburg, 2007; Pahore, Memon & Shaikh, 2024).

However, these women's status declined as colonialism arrived. They stopped receiving patronage from their old sources, and many of them later stopped paying taxes. They occasionally got arrested as a result of this, but they also frequently managed to avoid getting arrested by building close relationships with the police. Oldenburg observes that the relationship between prostitution and venereal diseases is another significant theme in the history of prostitution in India. European surgeons were becoming increasingly concerned about the increasing prevalence of venereal diseases among its soldiers (Oldenburg, 2014). Thus, Bhansali does not professionally carry the significant shift in courtesans' overall culture.

### Comparison

A structured comparison of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's drama series of *Heeramandi* and the historicist Veena Talwar's perspectives clarify Bhansali's divergent approach to portray culture and history of courtesans in Colonial India. This comparison makes the understating of the visual drama more applicable in terms of contrasting the facts and understanding human behavior.

Aspect	Bhansali's Representation	Historicist Perspective of Veena Talwar Oldenburg
Focus	Bhansali focused merely on artistic representation of the courtesans	Oldenburg provides facts within historical and cultural contexts
Characterization	He uses romanticized characters of courtesans along with their personal stories	While historical account represents their social roles and cultural duties.

Narrative Style	His style is dramatic, focusing on romanticizing the characters with emotional responses and appeal to aesthetics.	While Oldenburg in a scholarly approach provides objective analysis with historical truthfulness.
Themes	Within historical setting, Bhansali provides the themes of love, empowerment, and sacrifice.	By actually engaging with history, Oldenburg discusses themes like colonial impact, gender dynamics, and social hierarchies.
Use of Visuals	He uses immoderate cinematography techniques and costume designs to portray historical facts and attract the audience.	She uses primary sources and historical evidence preferably so that facts are communicated directly.
Cultural Context	It seems that he provides a contemporary interpretation of the traditional facts, but contemporary interpretations are also multi-dimensional leaving his interpretation as flat.	Oldenburg contextualizes historical figures and both cultural and historical events that happened to them to provide an authentic well-rounded account.
Historical Accuracy	He distorts the facts with the use of his creative liberties required to bring dramatic effect.	She merely focuses on historical facts to develop an account of colonial happenings with the courtesans.
Audience Engagement	He engages audience for emotional response and attraction.	While dealing with facts have scholarly approach and serves the same purpose to engage the scholars.
Conclusion	Bhansali provides a romanticized view of the courtesans and as independent figures.	Oldenburg provides a complex yet realistic account of the lives of courtesans with historical accuracy.

### Analysis and Discussion

Sanjay Leela Bhansali in his dramatic series of Heeramandi has attempted to reimagine the world of the real-life courtesans of the walled city of Lahore, which is now in modern-day Pakistan yet this re-imagination has gone far away from historical facts what he in fact claimed while setting for this series. Bhansali created and directed the highly anticipated Hindi-language series that debuted on Netflix. The cast of Heeramandi is cosmological. Sanjeeda Shaikh, Sonakshi Sinha, Sharmin Segal, Richa Chadha, Aditi Rao Hydari, and Manisha Koirala are among them. Fardeen Khan, Adhyayan Suman, and Shekhar Suman also play important parts in the series (Heeramandi, 2024). Heera Mandi taught people how to be artistically talented through dance, music, and singing. The women of Heera Mandi were also trained in these arts. Prior to the British conquest of the Punjab in 1499, Heera Mandi was primarily a place where people came to enjoy and learn about the power of dance, music, and poetry. Sons of Mughal Nawabs came to learn etiquette and poetry. Their Salons were considered the finished schools for learning and teaching these arts (Legg, 2014). After arrival of the colonial master, Heera Mandi turned into a place where sex workers or prostitutes could operate sexual services only. In drama series, they are known as the queens of Lahore, defenders of propriety, grace, and refined manners that they once were as well yet this one-sided show has made Bhansali's approach to history as very much subjective first, and second, he, by ignoring other harsh realities of colonial masters have given the drama a surface level and excluded the multi-layered realities. There is glamour, richness of the stage, magnificent jewelry, and gaudy costumes (Heeramandi, 2024) but actual Heera Mandi of 1940s is missing. In response to such representation, the director replies that it was fun to show them in all diamonds and things like this (India.com, 2024). Moreover, Bhansali drastically hotchpotches landscapes that is not of actual Lahore. Similarly, Punjabi language that an average Lahori could speak is also missing in what he himself says 'a passion project' (Bollywood Hungama, 2024). The sentimentality shown in the characters is also beyond reality and thus unconvincing. Overall, instead of presenting reality the events have been exaggerated.

Lahore in the 1940s was very different from the renowned Tawaif culture of Lucknow, so the portrayal of historical accuracy even before this dramatic representation—Heeramandi, leaves a lot to be expected in films like earlier one Umrao Jan Ada. His maids do not speak proper Punjabi, his tawaifs are exquisitely and beautifully dressed, and his characters do not speak Lahori Punjabi. Bhansali has done casting and directed masterfully and artistically yet his approach has been left far away from reality and just to bring a 'synthetic feel' in the audience.

Manisha Koirala is portrayed as Shahi Mahal's Huzoor – Urdu word for Madam, who sacrifices herself for the women of Heera Mandi. As fierce, unforgiving, and relentless, she excels in her role. As the daughter of Bibojan or Malika Jan, Aditi Rao Hydari exhibits a strong commitment to the cause of freedom (Heeramandi, 2024) a manipulated historical fact

since having been relegated and looted by the colonial master, women of Heera Mandi had never performed this task. They have historically faced stigma and marginalization and excluded from any such political contribution. Courtesans were frequently portrayed as morally dubious individuals in British colonial discourse, which perpetuated stereotypes that portrayed them as seductresses or victims. Their cultural and societal contributions were toned down by this representation. Moreover, Indian society also viewed them negatively despite their fame in literature and the arts. They were frequently shunned by respectable society and demoted to a lower social standing because of their vocation, which was despised. A large number of courtesans were economically vulnerable due to their reliance on the patronage of wealthy men. Due to the disruption of traditional support structures brought about by changes in patronage systems, during colonial rule, their marginalization was made worst. Cultural customs and conventions changed as colonial values grew in importance. Courtesans, once important members of courtly culture, found their roles diminished (Khan, 2023).

Given this account, Bhansali has broadened this exclusion of courtesans by excluding them away from reality. By doing so, Bhansali has remained unjust in reporting the melancholies of these women and flouted historical accounts. They have neither contributed nor part of mainstream freedom narratives (Sadna, 2012). About presenting the narrative, a documentary filmmaker and media theorist Molly Dineen also focuses the ethics of representation in these constructed narratives. She favors the visual narratives that are built for underrepresented or marginalized communities while challenging the narratives based on power in the main cinema. Bhansali's drama series however do not observe these ethical obligations and leave the narrative 'a series for criticism' (Dineen, 1999). Since media shapes the people's understanding of facts, her views are very much relevant to New Historicists' perspective that reality is very much influenced by political, cultural and social dynamics at play in any society. It depends upon the director to arrange the facts according to the audiences' perception and to avoid biases that Bhansali has neglected.

Another real-life figure is Alamzeb, a tawaif in Heeramandi who aspires to become a famous poet and to free himself from the bonds of slavery after falling in love with the Nawab Tajdar. Historical accounts given by Veena Talwar also represent that women were very fond of learning poetry and sometimes to be a poet also (Oldenburg, 1990). Although it is a dramatic love story, there are many issues with her interpretation of Urdu verses. The series makes reference to Ghalib, but it ignores feminist authors who fought for the rights of underrepresented women, such as Ismat Chughtai (Tariq, 2024). The series also enable us to witness Fareedan, Rehana's daughter, destroying Malika and seizing control of Shahi Mahal in a desperate attempt to exact vengeance for the death of her mother. Her well-played performance highlighting her yearning for power brightens the screen and gives the narrative depth. In Bhansali's context, Greenblatt's concept of cultural materialism in historicizing the contemporary details also becomes relevant. Bhansali's social structure, cultural norms, and economic factors allow him to produce powerful characters even away from reality (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2020), or what New Historicists say that the narrative is influenced by the contemporary socio-political phenomenon. But, within these details, they suggest to maintain these cultural and personal biases in order to satisfy the spectators, which Bhansali has not managed. In doing so, instead of resisting he reinforces the dominant ideologies where interplay of cultural and political power creates circumstances for a powerful representation instead of considering historical facts. Historical facts inform that the power that was given to them in Mughal eras was taken back by the state during colonial rule (Chatterjee, 1993). He portrays these courtesans' physical bodies and men's desires in a manner that is influenced by contemporary social norms and power dynamics that only a limited percentage of courtesans may fall into.

Bhansali calls these courtesans the 'unsung heroes' of India's fight for independence from British colonial rule in the middle of the 20th century, a distorted fact that never exists in history of the courtesans of the Subcontinent. These women's eyes tell a story, but they were always viewed as entertainers and seen with their diamond necklaces, but what is behind their eyes was never known. Contrary to this contemporary visual account, Oldenburg's historical account provides details of their oppression, mistreatment, and exploitation. Since there is no proof whatsoever that the people of Heeramandi participated in the freedom movement, Bhansali's comments have drawn criticism and are considered controversial. Historicists' accounts like Veena Talwar Oldenburg (Oldenburg, 1990) and Gupta Mitra (Mitra, 2020) and social activist like Fouzia Saeed who has extensively researched on Heeramandi do not provide any such context (Saeed 2002), leaving the representation unrounded, flat, and without an inclusive narrative. American mass media theorist David Bordwell also claims that a narrative is central to disseminate history yet it leads towards altered perception of historical events if not presented in true form (Bordwell, 1996), this has been tactfully done by the director of Heeramandi. In the same regard, Michael Foucault also emphasizes that power structures also affect (dramatic) representation as less favorable facts are omitted or altered (Foucault, 1972). Furthermore, Stephen Greenblatt discusses how power subtleties and cultural contexts shape and influence narratives, including historical ones. His ideas can be applied to the falsification of historical facts, even though he does not limit his attention to historical dramas but literary writings as well (Greenblatt, 1991). Historical facts add that they were resilient to the oppressive patriarchal culture in the country but their social status was deteriorated by colonial annexation. British Contagious Disease Act of 1864 was another reason

to marginalize these women and to irrevocably push them to prostitution. Oldenburg's account also informs that women's actual stories behind these services are never told because they are not listened to. After colonial intervening, one thing that they have their head turned on to is that, they earn erotic capital (Khurana 2016). Thus, as per Oldenburg's insights, Bhansali's series can be reduced to spectacle only. For film critic, theorist, and philosopher Andre Bazin as well "the cinema is intrinsically realistic because of the mechanical mediation of the camera (Bazin, 2005). Similarly, Dalle Vacche Angela also notes moral and ethical link between the existing facts and their artistic construction and spectatorial reaction (Angela, 2020). However, Bhansali has produced his series without observing these limitations.

Furthermore, Brechtian theatre, an intersecting approach though, yet aligns with New Historicism at a point and informs that manipulating the facts brings the audience away from real situations and they can idealize what is presented before them. Instead of accepting such narratives, Brechtian theatre allows to question the narrative build by the director in the drama and it also allows to portray diverse perspectives through multiple voices to make story inclusive (Brecht, 1964). Since the movie covers the elite perspective of the courtesans, the narrative itself marginalizes many of the courtesans along with their problematic experiences. This phenomenon of marginalizing some voices, Hutcheon calls to reinforce and support the existing power dynamics. The analysis through these theorists again urges the director to be more inclusive and mindful while creating a (visual) narrative (Hutcheon, 1988). Hence, by employing Brechtian theatrical techniques, directors can provoke dialogue among the audiences about the social issues.

Using crime drama film *Gangubai* which starred Alia Bhatt and immersed the audience in Mumbai's famed red light district (Gangubai Kathiawadi, 2022), Heeramandi also employs the element of intertextuality. The idea of intertextuality describes how texts (narrative or visual) relate to one another and how they reference and impact one another. It implies that a text is not a standalone piece but rather linked to other texts by referencing diverse literary, historical, and cultural contexts. It further shows how the script of one drama helps to create and interpret another drama presented in series. Watching the crime drama *Gangubai*, it serves a resilient protagonist who rises to power by developing connections with politicians and thus gains agency. Theme of such empowerment is part of his latest series *Heeramandi* as well. Based on emotional depth, visual style and Bhansali's narrative choices – that are not much inclusive, the series highlight the element of intertextuality. Both of the dramatic versions show the courtesans as independent and romantic figures (Heeramandi, 2024). Nevertheless, by making the dynamic acts of power simpler, Bhansali needed to highlight their complex identities and the sacrifices that underlie their intricate relationships. Whereas, Bhansali states that "My goal is to give women the dignity that our society sometimes takes for granted," (India.com, 2024), yet he has unduly glamorized the Madams of *Heeramandi*, whereas the acts of sheer brutality happened to them, people's avaricious nature, and oppression of these women in colonial era have not been depicted.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative analysis has concluded by pointing out the notable differences between Sanjay Leela Bhansali's dramatization of *Heeramandi* series and Veena Talwar Oldenburg's historical account. Although Bhansali's cinematic style offers captivating stories and stunning visuals, it ultimately puts artistic interpretation ahead of accurate historical portrayal, in fact, historical facts manipulated and therefore grossly misrepresented. The work has elaborated that material conditions have shaped not only Bhansali's aesthetic conditions but thematic choices as well that he has explored. The analysis has further emphasized how crucial it is to accurately base historical narratives, particularly when discussing delicate topics like courtesans' culture of *Heeramandi*. Bhansali runs the risk of fostering misunderstandings and eroding the rich legacy of the courtesan community by prioritizing spectacle over content and thus has left their success and stigma of real life as unattended. This study serves as a reminder that, rather than reducing their works to simple entertainment, filmmakers have an obligation to respect the complexity of the cultures they depict to ensure that they meaningfully add to larger conversations about identity and representation of their lives lived in the past.

### **Implications**

The aspects of advocacy and activism in the dramatic representation of historical context of the courtesans can be studied in future to enable them to counter these mistreatments and alter their efforts for reclaiming dignity, rights, and opportunities.

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