

Skewed Sex Ratios, Cross Border Marriages and Status of Women in a South Indian Community

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Abstract: Skewed sex ratios in India has been a cause for serious concern among researchers and policy makers. The preference for boys over girls in Asian families combined with the change in the ideation to smaller families had resulted in the imbalance of the number of females to males in the country. More recently, the wide spread availability of technology which allows prenatal sex determination has played a vital role in enabling parents to choose to give birth based on the sex of their unborn child leading to further discrimination against girls. Literature from other countries, in particular China, points to some of the consequences to society of unbalanced sex ratios including the shortage of available brides for prospective grooms. This study aims to understand the phenomenon of cross border marriages in Tamil Nadu, a state which was an early adapter of reduced fertility. The study was conducted in Namakkal district, a region in Tamil Nadu which has a long history of female infanticide. Fertility decline combined with son preference has led to skewed sex ratios in the area, and a shortage of brides. The findings suggest that the fewer number of women in the community can be advantageous to women of marriageable age in neighbouring communities but disadvantageous to some men in deciding marriages. In general, the women from Kerala, married and settled in Namakkal district, who formed a part of our study expressed positive views of their cross border marriages. On the other hand, the ability of men to find a bride from within the community depends on the social and economic status of their families and the education level and quality of employment of the prospective bridegroom. Resorting to finding brides from Kerala has become an option for these men as the caste which the bride belongs to and other factors usually considered for a marriage are less important.

Keywords: Skewed sex ratios, Cross border marriages, Status of women, Shortage of brides, Fertility decline, Gounder community.

Introduction

Skewed sex ratios are of serious concern for societies and the causes for the same have long been debated. The phenomenon is more prevalent in East Asian and South Asian countries. In India, according to the 2011 Census, there were 37.3 million more men than women (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 2011). Sex ratios had improved across the states of India compared to 2001. A few states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh had more women or almost equal number of women as that of men. Other states have shown slight increase between the two censuses. However, these states still have skewed sex ratios.

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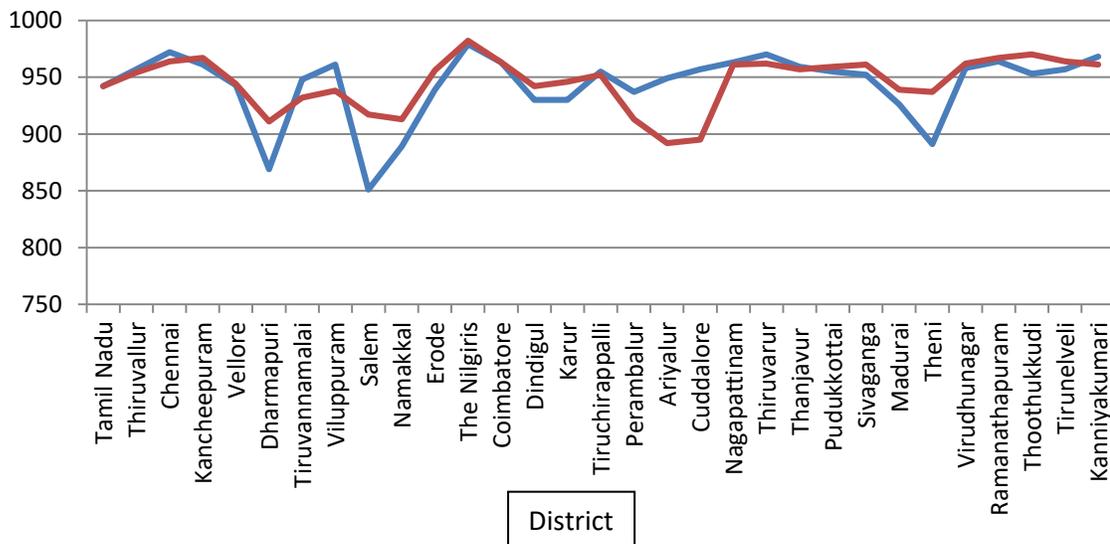
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It is speculated that such imbalance in the number of women to men will have far reaching consequences for society. Traditionally, after marriage sons are expected to remain with their parents and take care of them during old age whereas daughters leave to their husband's home after marriage and become a part of the husband's family (Attanie and Guilamoto, 2007). Societies which are characterized by a strong preference for sons and practice discrimination against girls have ended up with a low female to male sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males). More recently, the availability of technology which allows for prenatal sex determination has played a vital role in enabling parents to choose to give birth based on the sex of their unborn child leading to further discrimination against girls. In India, the rapid reduction in fertility rates have also contributed to the probability of having more sons in recent decades (Dyson, 2012).

Though female adult mortality rates started decreasing from the 1980s onwards resulting in a slight increase in total female to male ratio, the mortality among children by sex has not changed markedly. This pattern of mortality by age and sex can be attributed to sex selective foeticide and infanticide. This is the period when the prenatal sex selection technology became widely available and at the same time fertility preferences changed towards having fewer children. As fertility started declining more rapidly, low sex ratios have been observed in southern states where otherwise discrimination against women is less apparent compared to that found in other parts of the country. In India, the fertility transition did not begin at the same time across all regions. The southern region, in particular, Kerala and Tamil Nadu were forerunners in the transition to lower birth and death rates, and had achieved replacement level fertility earlier than the rest of the country. It is notable that from this point on the demographic patterns in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have diverged. Kerala has maintained high sex ratios whereas in Tamil Nadu, though the sex ratio at the state level is comparatively better than other states in the country, inter-district comparisons within the state over a period of time reveals a varied pattern.

Figure 1: Child Sex Ratio (0-6) for Districts of Tamil Nadu, 2001-11



Source: Registrar General of India, 2011

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Though sex ratios in most of the districts of Tamil Nadu show a declining trend from 1961 to 1971, subsequently it started increasing gradually in all regions except for Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem and Namakkal districts. The decreasing trend continued in these districts till 2001 with a small increase observed in 2011. According to 2001 and 2011 censuses, child sex ratio is observed to be very low in the four districts compared to other districts in the state. Low sex ratios during 1980s and 1990s and considerable fertility decline at the same time has resulted in an excess number of males in the cohort which has reached marriageable ages. There is evidence that men in the age group 40 and above remain single and are unable to get brides from their own community which is the usual practice in Indian settings (Srinivasan, 2012).

In spite of the fact that Tamil Nadu has been successful in reducing the infant mortality rate on average, Namakkal is one of the districts which has higher infant mortality rates. Studies in Tamil Nadu during the 1980s and 1990s (George et al., 1992; Negi, 1997) have shown that the occurrence of female infanticide was found to be higher among the Gounder community, which is the dominant community in the western region of the state. The “female infanticide belt”, a term coined by Chunkath and Athreya (1997), starts from Madurai, extends across the districts of Dindigul, Karur, Erode, Salem, Dharmapuri to North Arcot in Tamil Nadu. Studies have found that ‘cross border marriages’ occur in certain areas of Tamil Nadu (Srinivasan, 2012), particularly, in districts such as Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem. These studies indicate that most of the districts which were referred to as “female infanticide belt” have experienced shortage of brides in the recent decades and have resorted to the practice of marrying brides from outside the community.

In India, majority of marriages are arranged by family members and relatives, and to a large extent brides and grooms are from similar social and economic status. However, with the shortage of brides, men tend to marry women from different socioeconomic strata or from other geographical regions, which will in turn affect the nuptiality pattern in the bride giving area as well. In this scenario, two sets of arguments prevail in the literature. In some societies, a surplus of men has resulted in the trafficking of women, bride buying and increased violence towards women, which ultimately places women in extremely vulnerable positions and pushes them to be dependent on men for safety and protection. The second argument is that a shortage of women creates value and improves their status. A review of the literature indicates that both scenarios are present in Indian society. Many researchers have documented the problems faced by women who migrate for marriage from a distant place and from a different culture. Though it reduces the practice of dowry and men pay money to the brides’ family, it appears that their status does not improve. Studies in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana have pointed out the existence of bride buying and polyandry in cross-border marriages (Kaur, 2004). Sometimes, this kind of marriage squeeze results in women and girls being trafficked. It was found that girls from Nepal, Bangladesh and various parts of India are trafficked to female deficit regions which include Haryana and Uttar Pradesh and forced into marriage (Baruah, 2012; Blanchet, 2005). Kaur et.al. (2015) lay out some positive aspects of the marriage squeeze including the relaxation of rigid marriage norms in these northern states. Further, studies from Tamil Nadu (Srinivasan, 2015) found that the marriage squeeze weakens the dowry system and caste endogamy.

As has been seen in the earlier discussion, Namakkal is a region which has a history of low child sex ratios. Studies have suggested that the low sex ratios in the Namakkal area is

chiefly attributable to a deficit of females in a particular community, i.e., Kongu Vellala community (Srinivasan, 2015). In the context of fewer females to males in the community, men from the cohort which experienced fertility decline during the 80s and 90s have experienced difficulty in getting brides from their own community when they reached marriageable age. Some of the men in this cohort ended up remaining unmarried well into their late 30s or 40s and thus had to resort to getting brides from other communities. Thus, marriage practices are changing out of necessity. While there is some attention given in research studies (for example Srinivasan 2015 and 2012) and media discussions to the issue, the focus has been on the community where the shortage is found, and the concern has been about the delayed marriage among men. Thus, the studies are from the perspective of the men, their family members and other members of the community. It is important to study the views of women who have come to a new community and have to adapt to new conditions. Therefore, this study aims to understand the phenomenon of cross border marriages in Tamil Nadu from the perspective of brides from other communities, their status and well-being, and acceptance into the community.

Data and Methods

This study is based on information collected in Namakkal, a region of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has a history of female deficit, female infanticide and female foeticide. Qualitative information was collected through in-depth interviews from men who married to women from Kerala, and women from various communities who are married to men in Namakkal. The snowball sampling technique was used for identifying respondents who fit these criteria and were willing to participate in the study. A medical doctor in the area was identified through a personal contact, who in turn made the introductions between the study team and two women from Kerala who married men from Namakkal district. These two women introduced the interviewer to a few other women who had come from Kerala to be married to men from the district. Two community members and two proprietors of marriage bureaus were also interviewed. The sample comprises of four men and twelve women (seven women married to men from Kongu Vellala Gounder community and 5 women married to men from other communities from Namakkal town and villages in Rasipumtaluk of Namakkal district. Information was collected through direct face to face interviews or via the telephone.

Findings of the Study

Information collected from various sources is discussed in this section such as: how these marriages are arranged, by whom, the social stigma attached to inter-cultural marriages, reasons for delayed marriage among men in the study area, bride shortage in the community, status of brides from Kerala and problems with adjustments faced by these brides.

Marriage Process in the Study Area

Marriage in the study area is generally arranged by the families of the bride and groom, mostly within the caste, and based on the matching of horoscopes. Dowry is a vital component in these marriages. A significant group in the study area is Kongu Vellala Gounders, which has a long history of daughter elimination and son preference (Heyer, 1992; Sekher and Hatti, 2006). Hypergamous marriages are common in the community as is the groom's family's demand for dowry in the form of jewels and money. Parents of girls aspire for grooms who are settled in

better jobs and belong to high economic status. In the process, men who are in occupations such as farming, service provision such as drivers etc. are less likely to get brides from the same community. Therefore, single men who are aged out of the marriage market have to look for girls outside the community or caste. There is high preference for marrying girls from interior Kerala for several reasons. These reasons include the fact that Tamil Nadu and Kerala are culturally and linguistically similar and that there is no need to worry about the bride's caste or socio economic background. The discussion which follows aims to provide more detail along these lines.

The study found that there were two types of match makers for Namakkal grooms and Kerala brides: marriage bureaus and participants of earlier cross border matches. Of the 12 women interviewed, four women had gotten married with the assistance of marriage bureaus and the remaining had found their spouses through personal contacts with people who were previously married and settled in the area. The latter included friends "*My husband's friend married my friend, through him my marriage was arranged* (Bindu⁴, age 47)" and relatives "*My aunt married in the KV community and settled in the same village. Through her this alliance was fixed* (Ajitha, age 36)."

Reasons to Look for Kerala Brides among Namakkal Men

From the discussions, it was evident that there is shortage of brides in the community and some men have difficulty in finding brides. As soon as the topic of reasons for cross border marriages was raised, the discussion diverts to the topic of men who are in "unsettled jobs" (meaning not in regular jobs) and men who are into farming. Another reason mentioned is that formerly, marriage among relatives was common in the area, and now that this practice is mostly absent, men seek brides from outside the family. Getting brides from outside the family becomes difficult as there are fewer girls in the community. Both girls and their parents aspire to find grooms from higher status families and those who are educated and in white collar jobs. It was also mentioned that it is very difficult to get brides for men in certain occupations such as truck driving and farming. The reason for not marrying truck drivers is that there has been a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS disease among this group and Namakkal district has the history of prevalence of HIV/ AIDS. The reason given by parents for not wanting farmers as grooms is that then their daughters will have to work in the hot sun as farming requires intense physical activity in agricultural fields and relatively low income compared to IT jobs and other business activities.

One of the woman respondents (Mini, age 35) gave the reason for her husband not marrying within the community as follows. "*My husband could not get any job outside as he has studied up to 12th standard only. He continued looking after the cultivation, which is inherited from his father. His younger brother studied engineering and is in IT job. He got married before my husband. My husband could not get a bride from his community and he had to look for girls outside the community.*"

Another respondent (Vinitha, 35) added that "*There are many women in my village from Kerala. When I got married, my husband was 39 and I was 27. He was taking care of the agricultural land owned by the family. So he did not get a bride for marriage. Main reason for men from this area marrying girls from Kerala is that there are less number of girls and more*

⁴ Name changed to maintain anonymity

number of boys in KV community because of the single child norm followed in the community for long time”.

Vini too mentioned that *“My husband lost his first wife and he did not get a bride from his community for second marriage. I am from a poor family and of higher age (she got married at 35). I have two sisters and two brothers. Here (Husband’s family), they are economically better-off, so we lead a happy life”.*

Reasons for Brides from Kerala

What are the solutions for the issue of men having problems in finding brides from their own community? When asked this question, the immediate response was that many people in the area married girls from Kerala which is a neighbouring state. The reason mentioned for preferring a girl from Kerala over brides from other communities is that one does not have to worry about the caste and status of the family whereas if a bride is sought from the same place, these dimensions come into focus, particularly as parents do not want to bring a bride from a lower caste.

Another respondent (Mini, age 42) added that *“Languages are similar, those who know Malayalam can learn Tamil easily. Most of Kerala brides are treated well. So we also adjust for certain things like food habits, dressing etc. We buy Kerala rice and cook. Now I got used to the local rice”.*

On the other hand, when asked about the reason for brides from Kerala being married off to men in such a distant place, poverty and inability to afford dowry in Kerala were major reasons given. As, (Vijaya, aged 37), bride from Kerala says, *“We are three sisters. I am the eldest and my family is poor. My husband is a “Group D” employee in Namakkal Municipal Office. Through a marriage assembler, he approached my family and did not demand any dowry. Whatever minimum they could give, they gave as dowry like one chain, nose pin, ear rings and few thousands in cash whereas if it was a groom from our place, they would have demanded several sovereigns of gold, which my parents cannot afford”.*

Some of the women from Kerala who were interviewed had remained unmarried till their thirties. Others were women who married for the second time. As Bindu narrates, *“I married a widower, he has two children from the first marriage and I have one child. My friend also got married as second wife. We both are from poor families and of higher age (she got married at 35). I have two sisters and two brothers. Here (Husband’s family), they are economically better-off, so we lead a happy life.”*

Another reason given by all the brides from Kerala is associated migration. That is, if the brides’ family knows there is someone from their village, a neighbouring village or among their relatives married to a man in Namakkal area, then they are willing to marry off their daughters to men from the same place. Further, brides from Kerala refer potential bridegrooms to their own relatives, neighbours and friends.

Status in the Community and Wellbeing of Women Married from Kerala

When asked about their relationship with the natal families, most of the women who had moved from other states and distant places to be married responded that they have good relationships with their families. While paying frequent visits to their natal families is not possible due to the distance and other responsibilities such as children's education, they keep in touch with regular telephonic communication.

Some initial problems were reported by women respondents, such as adjusting to local food habits and language, but these were considered to be small problems which were easily overcome. It is notable that many women expressed that the level of acceptance by the community and family members was high. These insights are illustrated by the words Sarala from Kerala who is married to a Kongu Vellala man. *"When I got married and came here, I had difficulty in adjusting to food and language. I started talking to my mother-in-law in sign language and then slowly started understanding the local language, Tamil. She (mother-in-law) also told me it is not necessary to eat their food, I can prepare the food I want. We celebrate Pongal as well as Onam. I prepare Pongal (a sweet dish made for the Pongal festival in Tamil Nadu) during the Pongal festival and cook Kerala style food during Onam festival. Other family members also eat Kerala style food when I cook"*.

As another respondent mentioned *" I have four sisters and two brothers. I came to this family through neighbours who got married and were living in this village. I wanted to live at a distant place. So I enjoy. I know many Kerala women here. We meet in functions. Sometimes we plan and arrange a meeting. I have a Kerala neighbour, we are friends. I used to do tailoring job before marriage. Now I do not have to work, I take care of the house and enjoy a better living standard compared to my natal family."*

As mentioned, majority of women married from Kerala responded that they live a happy life in their place of residence. However, some women, particularly, those married to men from backward castes and those belonging to poor families faced certain difficulties. These marriages were mostly conducted through marriage assemblers. In a few cases, the marriage assemblers cheated the girls' families by misrepresenting the men as having their own house or holding a permanent job when in fact these men did not have anything of the sort.

In one incident it was found that the husband of a woman from Kerala was married previously and had two daughters with his first wife. Both the husband as well as the marriage assembler hid this information which was found out only after marriage. Vijaya said, *"My family was told that he has his own house and he does house construction on contractual basis. But he does not own a house and he is a daily wage worker. A week after marriage, I came to know that he has another family and he has two daughters from the first marriage. The quarrel started from that day and he does not go for work regularly. I work as a domestic help, manage the family and educate my kids. He is a drunkard"*.

On raising this case with the proprietors of the marriage bureaus, they responded that this sort of thing used to happen earlier, but now a thorough check of the background of men is done after which they proceed with the match. One of the marriage assemblers reported that his condition to families is that they have to register the marriage in Kerala as well as in Tamil Nadu

in order to provide legal security to the marriage. He also mentioned that he occasionally goes and meets the bride for a year after marriage just to assure a support in case of any difficulty.

Acceptance of Cross Border Marriages by the Community

To get the perspective of other stakeholders, efforts were made to contact marriage bureaus or marriage information centres in the study area. Out of the five that were contacted, only the proprietors from two bureaus were willing to talk about the phenomenon. The others rejected the contention that marriages between brides from Kerala and men from the Namakkal and surrounding districts even take place and reported that they arrange marriages within the community only. The two who agreed for the interview are originally from Kerala. It is notable that though it is likely that most of them arrange such marriages, they hesitate to talk about the issue.

A proprietor of a marriage bureau who agreed to the interview pointed out that: *“There are separate marriage information agencies for Kongu Vellala Gounders. When parents of unsettled grooms (meaning not having good education and occupation) or the grooms themselves approach them, they tell them they do not want to register such profiles as they do not get girls from the same community for marriage and advise them not to waste money by registering with them.”*

Similarly, in the attempt to find brides from Kerala to interview for the study a member of the KV community said that *“I know few people who married girls from Kerala, but do not want to refer them as they might feel bad and may affect my relationship with the family”*. One of the community members interviewed, a medical doctor by profession, added that there is a social stigma attached to the issue in the community and marriage brokers too do not accept that they arrange such marriages. It is evident from the whole process that though people are open to accept brides from Kerala, they do not want to reveal it in the community openly.

Beena also mentioned that *“I do not want to recommend any bride from Kerala for the marriage. Though they treat us very well and we also enjoy higher economic status than earlier, many families do not want to disclose that they married a Keralite. Marriage brokers do arrange such marriages but they do not disclose”*.

Further, it was reported that even though there were many women married from Kerala into the Namakkal area during the past two decades, that number is reducing and recently the trend has been to look for brides from Sri Lanka, particularly in the KonguVellala community. These brides are from the same community and from families which have migrated to Sri Lanka a few generations back. Those families are willing to send their daughters to Tamil Nadu due to rising tension and the unsettled life in Sri Lanka. Thus, it appears that getting brides from outside the community is not accepted by the larger community, and the phenomenon is in flux.

Conclusion and Discussion

Some regions of Tamil Nadu such as the districts of Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Namakkal and Salem have a history of low sex ratios. Overall, it is clear that fertility decline combined with low sex ratios lead to the shortage of brides in these areas. The findings suggest that the fewer

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number of women in the community can be advantageous to women of marriageable age in neighbouring communities but disadvantageous to some men in deciding marriages. In general, the women from Kerala, married and settled in Namakkal district, who formed a part of our study expressed positive views of their cross border marriages. On the other hand, men belonging to poor families, who are less educated and in unsettled jobs have difficulty in finding brides and as a result their marriages get delayed. Resorting to finding brides from Kerala has become an option for these men as the caste which the bride belongs to and other factors usually considered for a marriage are less important. Previous empirical studies and the media discussions have focused on the issue of delayed marriage and brides from Kerala among Kongu Vellala Gounder community men (Srinivasan, 2015), but the reality is that, marrying brides from Kerala is common among other communities in the area as well in the context of fertility decline. As Tamil Nadu, particularly, the Kongu Region, was an early starter of the fertility transition, the shortage of brides began during the 80s and 90s. In India, each state is in various phases of the fertility transition, with some having completed the transition and some at midway. Researchers (Vishwaskarma et al., 2019 for example) have found that most of the states in India are already facing the marriage squeeze. Therefore, at some point or the other, given the low sex ratios, other states and other areas, will enter into similar situations.

It is evident from the results that both pull factors such as shortage of brides and push factors such as the dowry system in Kerala have resulted in cross border marriages in the study area. Generally, women who are married into places which are far from their natal family tend to face difficulties due to the disconnect from the natal families and lack of negotiating power with their husband and his family members. However, this was not found to be true in the present study. Women expressed their satisfaction with their current situation and the high level of acceptance by husband's family members. Further, as many women from Kerala live in the same village and even in the same street, they are able to cope with the separation from their natal family and community. This brings out an interesting combination of the co-existence of both low status as well as high status of women. Low sex ratios, daughter deficit and shortage of brides are seen as indicators of low status of women whereas acceptance of women by family members and their satisfaction towards married life can be seen as indicators of better status of women.

It is notable that although the community has solved their bride shortage by resorting to brides from other states, and even treating them well there is a lack of openness to the phenomenon. There is a social stigma that is attached to cross border marriages as the community members as well as the marriage assemblers do not accept or reveal that there such marriages are happening.

One detrimental effect of shortage of brides and delayed marriages may be the weakening of the agriculture system which in turn has affected the practice of land and property inheritance by sons. The dowry system and inheritance of property by sons were cited as main reasons for daughter elimination. The combination of IT boom and an unfavourable market for agricultural produce has resulted in the current situation. As the later one is weakening, the dowry system appears to have complex realities. On one hand, delayed marriages among men force them to seek brides from outside the community which weakens the dowry system and on the other hand,

hypergamous marriages are preferred by women and their parents within the community which strengthens the dowry system.

India is diverse in several aspects. Studies from other parts of India on low sex ratios and cross border marriages provide evidence for the fact that any change cannot happen in a uniform manner. For example, a study in Punjab found that factors such as migration among males, women's education combined with women deficit complicate the situation (Kashyap et al., 2015) and informal polyandry appears to be taking place in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997; Hershman, 1981).

Findings from the present study signal the need to address the implications of daughter deficit not only in one community or one area, but by considering local factors and processes that affect the marriage situation. Daughter deficit and gender discrimination are a continuing problem for India and should be dealt with as a whole in order to address the challenge it poses on the Indian family system and family structure.

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