

NOVEMBER 2018, ISSUE NO. 35

TRAVEL & DEAL



A woman's lone efforts shape Ma Durga in Silchar

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DESTINATION SPOOK

TOP 5 HAUNTED DESTINATIONS OF INDIA

A woman's lone efforts shape Ma Durga in Silchar: The journey of Durga Puja in Silchar

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The prologue to 'Durga Puja 2018' in Silchar and its neighbouring areas begins on a sublime note. It is a story of a woman, indomitable in her will and unmoved in her determination. In a 21x12 scantily lighted room, built with bamboos and mud, dangles a florescent bulb in which a widow Kalpana Pal, in her sixties, keeps on making idols of various god and goddesses. Kalpana, a resident of Srikona in Silchar, works both from her house and that room which is at Tarapur in Silchar. Her story is unique in more than one way. Her husband also used to make idols till the cruel hands of death snatched him from her. She has been engaged in idol making when she was just 22. Come September-October and she is busy in giving finishing touches to her creations, be it Lord Bishwakarma or Goddess Durga.



A mother of two sons and an unmarried daughter, she works day and night to make a living for her family. She says that idol making has become a tough job since the cost of the raw materials has skyrocketed in the recent times. However, her indomitable will and strong determination to make idols have kept her going against all odds. On an average, each idol cost not more than rupees fourteen thousand and it is getting harder for Kalpana Pal to make both ends meet.



This Durga Puja she will supply 4 to 5 idols of Maa Durga. In fact, her husband was a master craftsman who used to win prize for the best idol.

A bite of history

The history of Durga Puja in Barak Valley, though shrouded in mystery, dates back to the days of Dimasa rulers. Dimasa rulers patronized the festival. The ancient Dashabhuja Temple in Bihara suggests that people have been celebrating Durga Puja since time immemorial. The tradition of animal sacrifices during Durga Puja has been in practice for the very beginning.

The Ambience

Three things define a Bengali – cuisine, cinema and celebration. Come September-October, the heart of a Bengali gets filled up with an ecstatic feeling as he begins to have ‘Pujo Pujo Bhav’. This feeling (Bhav) comes from the deep sense of attachment that a Bengali has with Durga Puja – his biggest festival. Mornings and evenings of the months of September and Oc-



tober usually set the tone for Durga Puja. Ask him and he will settle down to explain each and every aspect of the Puja which is more than just a festival for him.

Craze for Shopping

Who does not love to hop into a shop and enjoy unlimited shopping? People of Silchar can be seen making a beeline for Central Road which is a home to all renowned shops, markets and complexes. Durga Puja also provides a golden chance for shopaholics to buy new clothes like saris, Punjabis, jewellery sets, ornaments, cosmetics, shoes and what not. It is an endless list which goes on and on and on. A mass hysteria marks the pre-Puja days when thousands of Bengali girls and women flock to buy saris for themselves and their close ones. There is a fad among them





for 'Lal Pair' saris (white saris with thick red border). Yes, Bengali women are mad, crazy and passionate about saris.

The mystic Mahalaya morning

Mahalaya mornings are one of the most celebrated and cherished mornings in the life of a Bengali and it is one of the most important features of Durga Puja since it marks the beginning of the festivities. Mahalaya marks the end of Pitri Paksha and beginning of Devi Paksha requesting Goddess Durga to come down to the earth. People are seen making a beeline for Sadarghat Bridge which runs across the River Barak. Thousands, dressed in their finest dresses, come out early in the morning for merry-making. The whole ambience gets supercharged with emotions and festivities. The Agamani Sangeet sets the tone which no Bengali can afford not listening to.

The arrival of the Goddess and her departure

The big day arrives when the Goddess is heartily welcomed by all. The days of Panchami, Sasthi, Saptami, Asthami, Navami and Dashami comprise boundless merrymaking, amusement and pleasure.



The town, wearing a bridal look, looks exquisite and lovely. Though a huge number of Puja pandals are made, some very special ones deserve mention here. Udharband Durga Puja, Tarapur Sarbajanini Durga Puja, Mitali Sangha, Public School Sarbajanini Durga Puja, Tarun Club, Rakhi Sangha and Ananda Parishad deserve special mention. These are exceptional Puja Clubs which excel in every aspect. All emotions, passions and memories linger for a long time as people, with heavy hearts, bid adieu to Maa Durga on Dashami as the Goddess sets on a journey to meet her beloved husband.

DESTINATION

SPOOK

Top 5 haunted destinations of India

“She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking.”

Picture this. In the hills, past sunset, complete tranquillity, a crackling bonfire, kullads of chai with a hot mix of pakodas, your group of really close friends, and a bunch of killer ghost stories. Now that’s what I call a perfect late evening, of a perfect holiday! I admit, I am a big fan of the paranormal, and these are the top five haunted destinations I’d love to visit, with or without my partner, who happens to be averse to all things creepy. And these are not for the faint hearted...



Jamali Kamali, Delhi

The story goes like this. Centuries back, a Sufi saint named Sheikh Jamal-ud-din Kamboh Dehlawi, a man quite acclaimed for his poetry, came to India during the reign of Sultan Sikendar Lodi. People, impressed by his poetry and seeing the beauty in his words, gave him a new name: Jamali, literally meaning the possessor of beauty and positive aura in Urdu. Who would have known that the mausoleums of this 16th century Sufi saint would earn such an iniquitous reputation!

However, Who Kamali was remains a complete mystery until today. There have been many conjectures. Some say he was the disciple of Jamali; or another Sufi poet perhaps; while others seem to believe he may have been just a servant who served the Saint till the end. But there are no clear answers. Perhaps Kamali wasn't even the person's real name. It may have

become popularly accepted because it happened to rhyme with 'Jamali'. Another version that is predicted in folklore is that Kamali may have actually been Jamali's wife; a woman, who now after centuries, is believed to be a man because of the name that she had, which sounds tad masculine. Kamali died first, and Jamali who had an important place in the royal court at that time, built a tomb for his beloved wife. After Jamali's own death, Emperor Humayun had him buried right next to her.

Located within the arcades of the Mehrauli Archaeological Park, with Qutub Minar as one its more popular neighbours, this place looks rather unassuming, perhaps even disappointing to the adventurous ones who are looking for some thrills. Without second thoughts, this is a popular spot among history enthusiasts, marked under the Archaeological Survey of India. However, apart from its architectural grandiose, apparently there are voices that call out to the visitors from the mazaar inside the central dome of the mausoleum. People who visit this place always complain of an invisible gaze deftly following their movements.



And if you are lucky, you could just be tapped on your shoulders from behind, or ardently be called on to look back just once. And pretty much like all clichéd warnings go, never look back.

However you may as well, if you want to write a first-hand feature on the phantom happenings in this tomb!



Putulbari, Kolkata

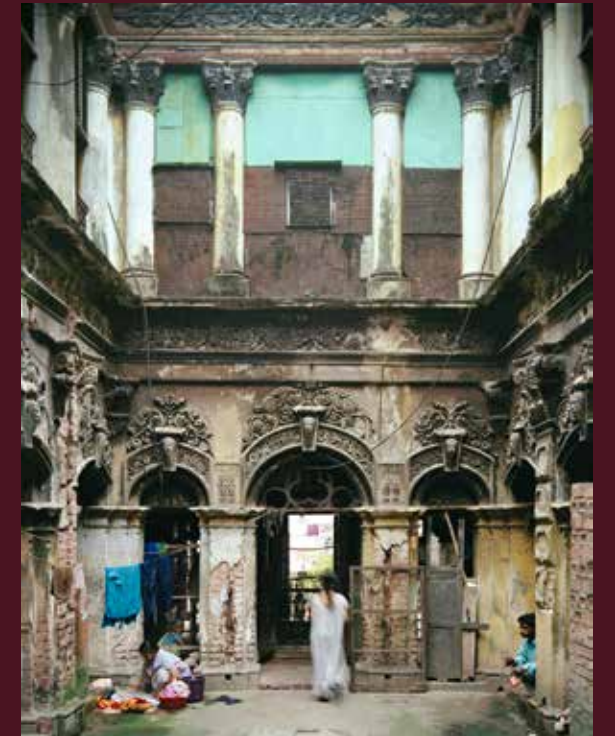
The very thought of dolls in an old house complete with cobwebs, creaking staircases and screechy doors builds that foreboding feeling of dread. Annabelle anyone?

Situated near the Sovabazar jetty, not far from the allegedly haunted Nimtala Ghat, Putulbari or the “House of Dolls” is your classic haunted trope. Though there still remain some inhabitants on the ground floor, no one dares visit the upper storeys. The huge Roman style architecture along with

the a collection of dusty, decaying ventriloquist dolls on stands just multiplies the chances of having a heart attack, and in case you are one of those (mis)adventure seeking souls ever hungry for the paranormal, surely visit this bonedi mansion.

Years ago, in her heydays, the Putulbari was home to the Natta family. This once affluent and much esteemed family were owners of the Natta Jatra Company, perhaps the most successful Jatra companies in West Bengal, pioneers in their game. Jatras are a fading form of musical folk-theatre art based on themes about religion, mythology and history. It was in the mid-19th century that this Natta Company became so exceedingly popular for its musical presentations and colourful and glittering outfits, which were the main attractions for the poor and not so literate rural audience.

However, there was a darker side to this otherwise blemish-less dynasty. It is said that certain Babus of the Putulbari had misused their powers to sexually exploit young women inside the mansion, and had even got some of them murdered.



Thus began the gossip about spirits of those women still haunting the place in order to seek justice. Deep in the night, one may get to hear shrill laughs or the clinking of bangles and anklets! Sweet dreams now.



The Shaniwarwada Fort, Pune

A gigantic empire, an illustrious legacy, a massive game of power, and a brutal nepoticide for succession. These words more or less sum up the blood curdling story of the haunted fort of Shaniwarwada.

One look at it and you'll be struck by its magnificent architecture. But that atmosphere of mystery that lies beyond its walls cannot go unnoticed. The fort is known for having witnessed some high level of supernatural activity. However, one cannot help but consider for once, how different things would have been had greed not taken its toll over sanity.

Vishwasrao, Madhavrao and Narayanrao were the three sons of Peshwa Nanashaheb, grandsons of the legendary Peshwa Bajirao-1. After the death of Nanashaheb, second son Madhavrao succeeded as the next Peshwa because elder son Vishwasrao had died in the third battle of Panipath. Since he was really young, Bajirao's brother Raghunath Rao, acted as his regent. Madhavrao succumbed to tuberculosis at 27, and that is when 16 year old Narayanrao had to take over. However all was not well. Uncle Raghunathrao's wife Anandibai became very jealous. She had after all always had the burning desire to be the Queen of State. As

situations worsened, and Narayanrao started to control the power of Raghunathrao, the latter took to writing a letter to Sumer Singh Gardi, the fierce chief of the hunting Gardi tribe, instructing him to capture his nephew for good. Narayanrao had had a bitter relationship with the Gardis, thus the plan was brilliantly befitting for both parties. However, Raghunathrao's wife Anandibai used this as an opportunity for something far more sinister. She changed one letter in the text, just one, but the meaning instantly stood disastrously distorted. Instead of capturing, the letter now became a command to kill.

Sumer Singh sent a group of assassins at night, who entered the room of sleeping Narayanrao, all security eliminated. Narayanrao woke up and understood he was going to be killed. Innocently, he ran towards Raghunathrao's chamber, shouting "KAKA MALA VACHWA!" ("Uncle save me!"). But the night was unfortunate, and he was caught midway by the assassins, and was brutally assassinated by them, his body hacked to pieces and then dumped in the river.



It is believed that the Ghost of the young Peshwa still resides in this fort, reliving his last minutes of painful agony. On every new moon night, he continues to call for his uncle to save him, the words "Kaka Mala Vachva" clearly echoing through the dark silence.

Shaniwarwada is also said to be infested by the dark spirits of people who died in the fire that destroyed the fort. Entry is restricted after 6:30 p.m. So, you know what to do!



Bhangarh, Rajasthan

I read this somewhere. A group of tourists once bribed the keeper to let them inside the supposedly haunted complex of the Bhangarh Fort after night fell. The keeper let them in, albeit with a stern warning that it wasn't advisable to go inside so late since it was believed to be haunted by spirits during the night. Unmindful of the warning, the group trotted inside joking and laughing. It was all good up to the point they noticed a boy sitting alone inside one of the rooms. The only glitch was that the room had no door and a window which was tightly grilled. This happened for real.

Bhangarh Fort has many such stories associated with it. A place so riddled with the elements of paranormal that even the formal administrative system of ASI consents the same. A place where it is officially forbidden to venture in after darkness falls. Located in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, Bhangarh Fort is a 17th century testimony of a once magnificent structure, now in ruins. Because of the numerous ghostly experiences and happenings in the fort premises, villages have sprung up

far away from the fort, due to the fear of what lies within.

Legends have it that the fort and its surrounding establishments once buzzed with life. The beautiful, effervescent Princess Ratnavati was the pearl of Bhangarh. One time, a local black magician fell in love with her. She obviously turned him down, but he remained adamant. He concocted an enchanted perfume, the wearer of which would fall madly in love with him. The princess smelled suspicion and foiled his entire conspiracy by pouring the bewitched perfume over a massive stone boulder, which then crushed the tantric to his death in its 'pursuit of love'. Before the magician breathed his last, he placed a curse upon the entire population of Bhangarh that no soul would ever be able to live in peace there. The entire landscape around the fort has been haunted ever since.

Nevertheless, the fort remains to be a tourist hotspot for its serene atmosphere and architectural marvel during the day. But as night falls, the entire landscape is consumed by a cloud of gloom. One constantly feels as if their move-



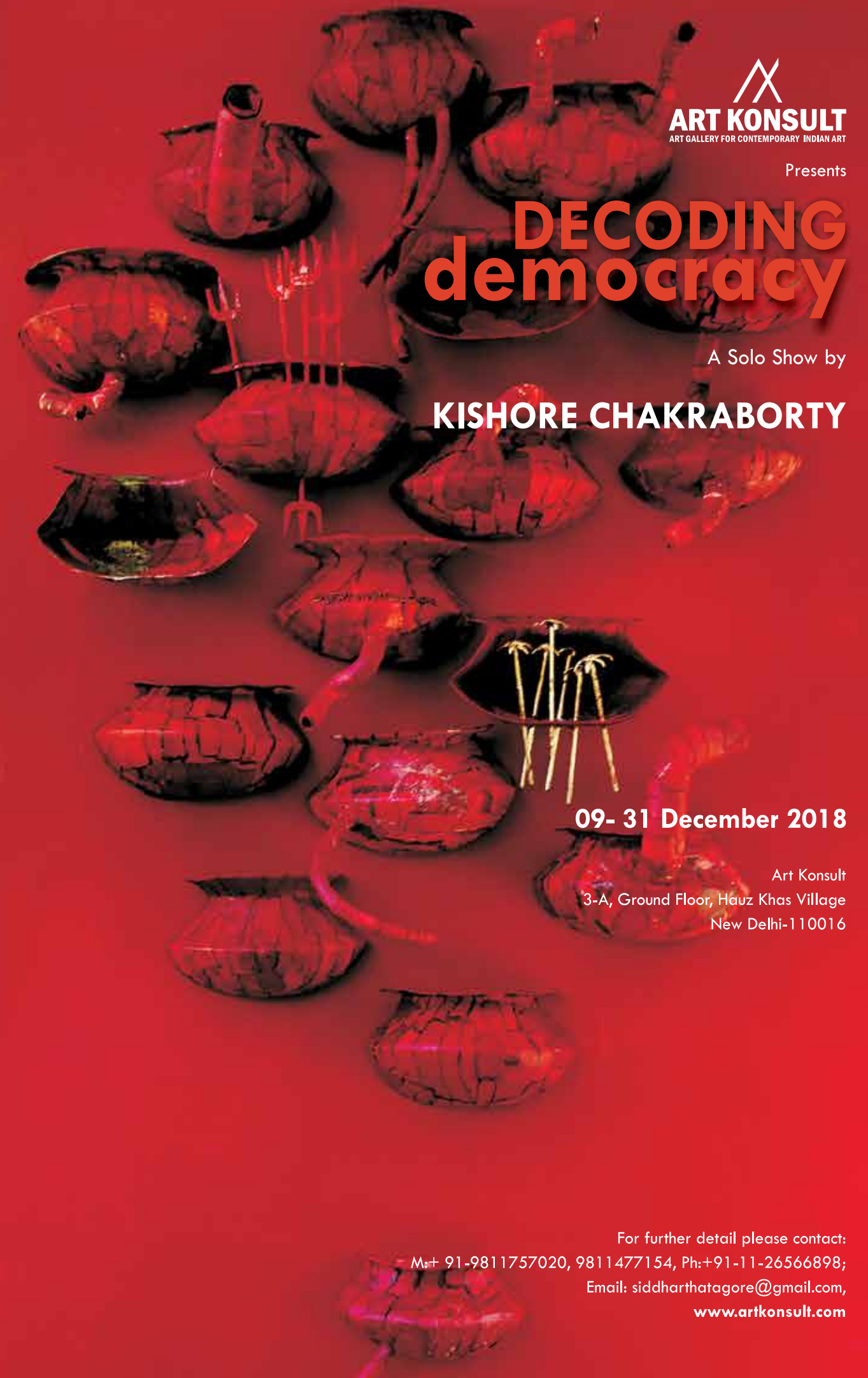
ments are being watched, and the air is charged with a dizzying heaviness. There is a board put up by the Archaeological Survey of India that cautions visitors not to venture within the premises after dark. There is evidence to support the claim of those who say that each one tried his luck either went missing or weren't able to explain anything coherently. Local folks swear by the fact that no one dares to build a house with a roof in the vicinity of the fort, because the roof happens to collapse shortly after being built. Riddle me that!



Mukesh Mills, Mumbai

So this is where the Shah Rukh Khan starrer “Om Shanti Om” was shot.

Mukesh Textile Mills was established by the East India Company in 1870s. After a fire broke out, thousands of people were killed and the mill was shut down in 1982. Over the years, the ruin of this deserted mill has served the film industry, and this place has become a hotspot for haunted shoots. However, the scary and dark history of this Mill is enough to scare every soul who dares enter the area after sunset. Stories of a possessed actress and eerie interiors are also associated with this mill. It is said that neither the directors nor the crew are ready to work in this place after sunset



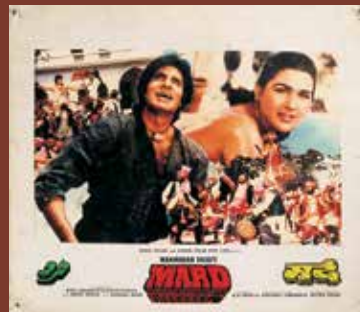
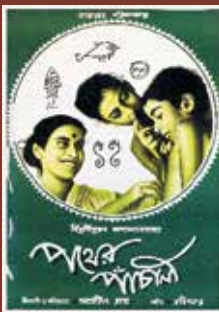
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