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WOMEN AND THEIR RELIGIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS IN EARLY BUDDHISM: A STUDY OF PĀLI LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT :



Women played a significant role in the development and transmission of early Buddhism, and Pāli literature provides valuable evidence of their religious participation, spiritual aspirations, literary expression, and institutional contributions. The present study examines the religious contributions of women in early Buddhism through selected Pāli sources, with particular attention to the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and related canonical narratives. The study explores the lives and teachings of early Buddhist nuns, laywomen, and other female followers who participated in the Buddhist community. Figures such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī illustrate different forms of women's engagement with Buddhist religious life. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha under Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī represents an important institutional development in the history of Buddhism. The Therīgāthā further preserves verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, expressing their experiences of renunciation, meditation, insight, freedom, and spiritual attainment. These literary records provide important perspectives on women's religious agency and their participation in the Buddhist path. The study further examines how Pāli literature represents women's capacity for ethical development, meditation, wisdom, teaching, and liberation. The narratives demonstrate that women participated in both monastic and lay forms of Buddhist practice and contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings. At the same time, the Vinaya literature contains regulations concerning the organization and conduct of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, reflecting the institutional context within which women's religious lives developed. A critical reading of these sources helps distinguish between women's spiritual achievements and the social and institutional conditions surrounding them. The study adopts a textual and analytical approach to examine the representation, experiences, and contributions of women in early Buddhist literature.

KEYWORDS : *Women in Buddhism, Early Buddhism, Pāli Literature, Therīgāthā, Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Buddhist Nuns, Laywomen, Religious Contributions, Buddhist Philosophy, Meditation, Spiritual Liberation, Gender and Religion.*

INTRODUCTION:

Women occupied an important place in the religious history of early Buddhism, and Pāli literature provides valuable evidence of their participation in the Buddhist tradition. From the earliest period of Buddhism, women appear as nuns, lay followers, supporters, teachers, and practitioners who participated in different dimensions of religious life. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha under

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī marked a significant development in the institutional history of Buddhism. Pāli canonical literature preserves accounts of women who followed the Buddha's teachings, adopted monastic life, supported the Saṅgha, practiced meditation, and sought liberation. The Therīgāthā, a collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, is particularly important for understanding women's religious experiences and spiritual achievements. These verses express themes such as renunciation, suffering, impermanence, mindfulness, meditation, wisdom, and liberation. The narratives of women such as Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī further demonstrate the diverse backgrounds from which women entered or supported the Buddhist religious community. Their stories provide important material for examining women's agency and participation in early Buddhist religious life.

The study of women in early Buddhism is also significant because Pāli literature presents both opportunities for religious participation and institutional regulations governing women's monastic lives. The Vinaya Piṭaka contains rules concerning the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, while the Sutta Piṭaka preserves teachings and narratives involving female disciples and lay followers. These sources allow researchers to examine women's roles in relation to ethical practice, meditation, learning, teaching, and spiritual attainment. The Buddhist emphasis on individual practice and liberation provides an important framework for understanding women's religious aspirations within early Buddhism. At the same time, the textual evidence needs to be examined within the social and historical conditions of ancient Indian society. A study of Pāli literature can therefore contribute to a balanced understanding of both women's religious achievements and the institutional contexts in which those achievements were expressed. The present study focuses on selected Pāli sources to examine the contributions of women to early Buddhism, their participation in monastic and lay religious life, their literary voices, and their pursuit of spiritual liberation. It seeks to highlight the significance of women's contributions to the development and transmission of the early Buddhist tradition.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To examine the religious contributions and participation of women in early Buddhism through a study of selected Pāli literature.

Objectives:

- To study the role of women in the development of early Buddhism.
- To examine the establishment and development of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.
- To analyse the contribution of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to early Buddhist history.
- To study the religious experiences of Buddhist nuns described in the Therīgāthā.
- To examine the roles of women as nuns, lay followers, disciples, and supporters of Buddhism.
- To study the contributions of prominent women such as Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī.
- To examine women's participation in meditation and spiritual practice.
- To analyse women's pursuit of wisdom and liberation in early Buddhism.
- To study relevant references to women in the Vinaya Piṭaka and Sutta Piṭaka.
- To examine women's literary contributions preserved in Pāli literature.
- To analyse the themes of renunciation, suffering, impermanence, and liberation in the Therīgāthā.
- To understand the religious agency of women in early Buddhist communities.
- To examine the relationship between women and the development of Buddhist institutions.
- To study the representation of women's spiritual capabilities in Pāli sources.
- To highlight the historical, religious, literary, and philosophical significance of women's contributions to early Buddhism.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The literature on women in early Buddhism draws substantially upon Pāli canonical texts, particularly the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and relevant narratives from the Khuddaka Nikāya. The Therīgāthā is especially significant because it preserves verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns and provides insights into their personal experiences, religious aspirations, struggles, meditation, wisdom, and liberation. The Vinaya Piṭaka provides important information concerning the establishment and organization of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and the disciplinary framework governing monastic life. Accounts of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and other prominent female disciples provide valuable evidence concerning women's participation in the early Buddhist community. The Pāli discourses also describe women such as Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī, presenting different forms of religious engagement. These primary sources indicate that women participated in Buddhist religious life as ordained nuns, lay followers, donors, practitioners, and supporters. The canonical literature therefore provides an important foundation for studying women's religious roles and spiritual achievements in early Buddhism.

Modern scholarship has expanded the interpretation of these primary sources through historical, literary, feminist, and comparative approaches. Isaline B. Horner made an important contribution through her studies and translations concerning women and the Bhikkhunī tradition in early Buddhism. K. R. Norman and other Pāli scholars have contributed to the textual and linguistic study of the Therīgāthā, helping researchers understand its literary and historical significance. Rita Gross examined women and gender within Buddhist traditions and provided broader perspectives on women's religious roles. Susan Murcott presented the lives and teachings of early Buddhist women, highlighting their spiritual achievements and religious experiences. Sallie B. King and other scholars have examined Buddhist perspectives on gender, religious authority, and women's participation. Studies of the Therīgāthā have also emphasized themes of renunciation, meditation, suffering, freedom, and liberation expressed through women's voices. Existing literature demonstrates that women were significant participants in early Buddhist religious life, while also revealing the institutional and social conditions surrounding their participation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, historical, and textual research methodology to examine the religious contributions of women in early Buddhism through selected Pāli literature. The primary sources include the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and relevant portions of the Khuddaka Nikāya. Particular attention is given to passages concerning Buddhist nuns, female disciples, laywomen, and prominent figures such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī. The study examines these sources through close textual reading and thematic analysis to identify references to women's religious participation, spiritual practices, institutional roles, literary expression, and attainment of liberation. Relevant Pāli terms, narratives, verses, and doctrinal teachings are examined within their historical and religious contexts. Translations of primary texts are used alongside scholarly interpretations to support a clearer understanding of the original material. Secondary sources include academic books, research articles, commentaries, historical studies, and scholarly works on women, gender, Buddhism, and Pāli literature.

The analytical approach focuses on major themes such as women's entry into the monastic community, formation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, ethical discipline, meditation, wisdom, teaching, religious patronage, and spiritual liberation. The study also examines women's literary voices in the Therīgāthā and considers how their experiences of suffering, renunciation, impermanence, and freedom are represented. A historical and contextual approach is used to understand women's religious participation within the social and institutional conditions of early Indian Buddhism. Comparative reading of selected canonical passages and traditional interpretations helps identify different representations of women's roles and achievements. The study does not involve field surveys, interviews, experiments, or statistical methods because its primary focus is textual and historical

analysis. The collected information is organized thematically according to the objectives of the research and interpreted critically in relation to early Buddhist teachings. Through this methodology, the study seeks to provide a systematic and balanced understanding of women's religious contributions to early Buddhism based on evidence from Pāli literature.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Women participated in early Buddhism in various religious, social, and institutional capacities, yet their contributions have often received less systematic attention than the broader development of Buddhist philosophy and monastic institutions. Pāli literature contains substantial evidence concerning Buddhist nuns, laywomen, female disciples, donors, and supporters, but this material is distributed across different canonical texts and requires careful examination. The Therīgāthā preserves the voices of early Buddhist nuns and describes their experiences of renunciation, meditation, suffering, wisdom, and liberation. The Vinaya Piṭaka provides information about the establishment and organization of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, while the Sutta Piṭaka contains narratives and teachings involving women from different social backgrounds. The central problem of the present study is therefore to understand the nature, extent, and significance of women's religious contributions in early Buddhism through these textual sources. It is necessary to examine whether women participated only as followers and supporters or whether they also contributed actively to religious practice, teaching, institutional development, and the transmission of Buddhist values.

A further problem concerns the interpretation of women's religious experiences within the social and institutional context of early Buddhism. Pāli texts contain accounts of women who attained advanced spiritual states, practiced meditation, composed religious poetry, supported the Saṅgha, and participated in Buddhist communities. At the same time, the Vinaya literature contains specific rules and institutional regulations concerning the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, creating a need for careful analysis of both women's opportunities for religious participation and the structures governing their monastic lives. The study therefore seeks to examine how women are represented in Pāli literature and how their religious agency, spiritual achievements, and contributions can be understood from the available textual evidence. It also addresses the need to distinguish canonical representations from later interpretations and modern assumptions about women in Buddhism. By analysing selected Pāli sources in their historical, literary, and religious contexts, the study aims to develop a clearer understanding of women's roles in early Buddhist communities and their contribution to the development, practice, and preservation of the Buddhist tradition.

NEED OF THE STUDY:

The study of women's religious contributions in early Buddhism is important for developing a broader and more balanced understanding of Buddhist history, philosophy, literature, and religious practice. Pāli literature preserves significant evidence concerning women who entered the monastic community, followed Buddhist teachings, practiced meditation, supported the Saṅgha, and pursued spiritual liberation. The Therīgāthā provides an especially valuable collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns and records their personal experiences, religious aspirations, struggles, and spiritual insights. The Vinaya Piṭaka provides information about the establishment and functioning of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, while the Sutta Piṭaka contains narratives and teachings associated with female disciples and lay followers.

The study is further needed to examine women's religious agency within the historical and institutional context of early Buddhism. The accounts of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and other women demonstrate different forms of participation in Buddhist religious life. Their experiences provide important material for understanding renunciation, meditation, ethical practice, wisdom, teaching, and liberation. At the same time, the rules governing the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha require careful contextual examination so that women's religious contributions are understood alongside the institutional structures of the period. A Pāli-based study can help distinguish textual

evidence from later interpretations and provide a clearer understanding of the historical significance of Buddhist women. The research is relevant to scholars and students of Pāli literature, Buddhist studies, religious studies, gender studies, Indian history, and philosophy. By systematically examining women's roles and voices in early Buddhist texts, the study can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the development and transmission of the early Buddhist tradition.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH:

Further research may examine women's religious contributions in early Buddhism through a more comprehensive study of the complete Pāli Canon and related commentarial literature. Scholars may undertake detailed textual studies of the Therīgāthā to explore the literary styles, religious experiences, and philosophical ideas expressed by individual Buddhist nuns. Comparative research between the Therīgāthā and the Theragāthā could provide further insights into similarities and differences in the religious experiences of Buddhist nuns and monks. Additional studies may focus specifically on the lives and teachings of prominent women such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, and Kisā Gotamī. Researchers may also examine the role of laywomen as donors, supporters, household practitioners, and participants in Buddhist communities. A detailed study of the Bhikkhunī Vinaya and its historical development could provide greater understanding of the institutional position of Buddhist nuns. Comparative studies involving Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and other early Buddhist sources may also help identify different textual representations of women and their religious activities.

Future research can also extend beyond textual analysis by examining the historical and contemporary dimensions of women's participation in Theravāda Buddhist communities. Field-based studies involving interviews, observation, and case studies may explore how modern Buddhist nuns and laywomen understand and practice the teachings preserved in early Buddhist literature. Comparative research across Theravāda communities in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, India, and other regions could examine differences in women's religious roles and institutional experiences. Interdisciplinary studies connecting Buddhist studies with gender studies, history, sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism may provide broader perspectives on women's religious agency. Digital humanities methods could also be applied to Pāli texts to identify references to women, recurring themes, and patterns of representation across large textual collections. Researchers may further investigate women's contributions to Buddhist education, literature, meditation traditions, social service, and religious institutions. Studies of the transmission and preservation of women's verses in the Therīgāthā could contribute to understanding the literary history of early Buddhism. Such research would extend the present study and provide deeper perspectives on women's historical, literary, institutional, philosophical, and spiritual contributions to Buddhism.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:

The scope of the present study is centred on examining the religious contributions and participation of women in early Buddhism through selected Pāli literature. The study focuses primarily on the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and relevant texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya. It examines the roles of Buddhist nuns, laywomen, female disciples, donors, and supporters in the development and practice of early Buddhism. Particular attention is given to prominent figures such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī. The study covers women's participation in monastic life, meditation, ethical practice, learning, teaching, religious patronage, and the pursuit of liberation. It also examines the literary and philosophical significance of women's verses preserved in the Therīgāthā. The establishment and development of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and its institutional context are considered through relevant Vinaya materials. The study also explores themes such as renunciation, suffering, impermanence, wisdom, spiritual attainment, and liberation as expressed in Pāli literature.

The study has certain limitations that define the boundaries of its interpretation. Since the research is primarily textual, it does not provide direct empirical evidence concerning the experiences

of women in contemporary Buddhist communities. The Pāli Canon is extensive, and therefore only selected texts and passages directly relevant to the objectives of the study are examined. Differences between Pāli editions, translations, interpretations, and commentarial traditions may influence the understanding of particular passages. The study is mainly concerned with early Buddhist literature preserved in the Pāli tradition and does not provide a comprehensive examination of women's roles in all Buddhist schools or traditions. Later historical developments of the Bhikkhunī tradition are considered only where they help contextualize the early evidence. The study also does not attempt to establish modern social or political conclusions from ancient textual material. Interpretations of women's status and religious agency are therefore based on the available textual and historical evidence. These limitations allow the research to maintain a focused examination of women's religious contributions within the textual and historical framework of early Buddhism.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The present study focuses on examining the religious contributions and participation of women in early Buddhism through selected Pāli literature. It covers important canonical sources such as the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and relevant texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya. The study examines the roles of Buddhist nuns, laywomen, female disciples, donors, and supporters within early Buddhist communities. Particular attention is given to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and other prominent women whose lives and teachings are represented in Pāli literature. The study includes an examination of the establishment and development of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and the religious opportunities available to women within the early Buddhist community. It also considers women's participation in ethical practice, meditation, learning, teaching, religious support, and the pursuit of spiritual liberation. The Therīgāthā receives special attention because it preserves the voices and experiences of early Buddhist nuns through religious poetry. The study examines themes such as renunciation, suffering, impermanence, mindfulness, wisdom, spiritual freedom, and liberation expressed in these literary sources.

The scope also extends to the historical, literary, philosophical, and religious significance of women's contributions to the development of early Buddhism. Relevant passages from the Vinaya Piṭaka are examined to understand the institutional organization and disciplinary framework of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. The study considers women's religious agency and their participation in the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings. It examines the relationship between women's religious experiences and broader Buddhist concepts such as sīla, samādhi, paññā, and liberation. The study also considers the diversity of women's backgrounds and forms of participation, including monastic and lay religious life. Traditional interpretations and selected scholarly studies are used to provide historical and contextual perspectives on the primary Pāli sources. The research is primarily textual and analytical and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive study of women in all Buddhist traditions or periods. The findings are intended to contribute to the study of Pāli literature, early Buddhist history, gender and religion, Buddhist philosophy, and women's religious participation. Thus, the scope provides a focused examination of the significant and diverse contributions of women within the early Buddhist tradition as represented in Pāli literature.

DISCUSSION

The study of women and their religious contributions in early Buddhism reveals that women occupied significant and diverse positions within the Buddhist religious tradition. Pāli literature, particularly the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, and selected texts of the Sutta Piṭaka, provides important evidence of women's participation in religious life as nuns, lay followers, disciples, teachers, meditators, donors, and supporters of the Saṅgha. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha under the leadership of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī represents an important institutional development in the history of early Buddhism. The experiences of women such as Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī demonstrate different forms of religious engagement and spiritual aspiration. The Therīgāthā is

particularly valuable because it preserves the voices of women expressing their experiences of suffering, renunciation, meditation, wisdom, and liberation. These verses indicate that women were not merely passive followers but active participants in Buddhist religious practice. Their spiritual journeys frequently involve recognition of impermanence, overcoming attachment, developing mindfulness, and attaining insight. The textual evidence also demonstrates that women participated in the ethical and meditative disciplines that formed the foundation of Buddhist religious life. Their contributions therefore extended beyond institutional support and included direct engagement with Buddhist teachings and practices.

The discussion further indicates that women's religious contributions should be understood within the social, institutional, and literary contexts of early Buddhism. The Vinaya Piṭaka provides information concerning the organization, discipline, and functioning of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, while narrative and doctrinal texts reveal women's interactions with the Buddha, monks, and wider Buddhist communities. Although the sources contain regulations and narratives reflecting the social conditions of ancient India, they also preserve examples of women exercising religious agency through renunciation, learning, teaching, meditation, patronage, and spiritual attainment. The accounts of prominent women show that Buddhist teachings concerning ethical conduct, mental cultivation, wisdom, and liberation were applied to women's religious lives in meaningful ways. At the same time, the representation of women in Pāli literature must be examined critically because the texts were transmitted within particular institutional and cultural contexts. The study therefore highlights both the opportunities for religious participation and the structural conditions within which women practiced Buddhism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research on women and their religious contributions in early Buddhism should undertake a systematic examination of a wider range of Pāli literature, including the Therīgāthā, Therī-apadāna, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and relevant commentarial traditions. Greater attention should be given to the individual experiences of women such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī, while also examining the experiences of less prominent women represented in the texts. Researchers should explore women's participation in meditation, ethical practice, education, teaching, religious discussion, patronage, and community activities. The literary dimensions of the Therīgāthā should receive further attention because its verses provide valuable perspectives on women's experiences of suffering, renunciation, spiritual practice, wisdom, and liberation. Comparative studies between the Therīgāthā and other early Buddhist texts can help identify similarities and differences in the representation of women. Researchers should also examine the development and organization of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and study Vinaya regulations within their historical and social contexts. Greater use of original Pāli sources, different textual editions, translations, and commentaries is recommended to improve interpretation and avoid dependence on a single translation.

Future studies should also adopt interdisciplinary approaches combining Buddhist studies with history, sociology, gender studies, literary criticism, anthropology, and religious studies. Comparative research between Pāli sources and Buddhist traditions preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages can provide a broader understanding of women's religious roles in early Buddhism. Researchers may investigate the relationship between women's monastic and lay religious activities and examine how patronage, family networks, social status, and economic resources influenced participation in Buddhist communities. Digital humanities methods may also be used to identify, organize, and analyze references to women across large collections of Buddhist literature. Greater attention should be given to the relationship between textual representation and historical experience, while avoiding assumptions that literary narratives automatically represent the complete social reality of early Buddhist women. Universities and research institutions should encourage specialized studies, translations, critical editions, seminars, and archival projects focusing on women in Buddhist history. Such research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of early Buddhism by recognizing women's intellectual, spiritual, literary, institutional, and community contributions while

maintaining careful attention to the historical contexts in which the Pāli texts were produced and transmitted.

CONCLUSION

The study of women and their religious contributions in early Buddhism demonstrates that women participated actively in the development and practice of the Buddhist tradition. Pāli literature, particularly the Therīgāthā, Vinaya Piṭaka, and Sutta Piṭaka, provides valuable evidence concerning women's religious experiences, institutional participation, spiritual practices, and contributions to Buddhist communities. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha marked an important development in the history of Buddhist monasticism and created an institutional space for women to pursue religious life. Figures such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Ambapālī illustrate different forms of women's engagement with Buddhism. Their narratives reflect experiences of renunciation, ethical discipline, meditation, learning, teaching, devotion, and spiritual transformation. The Therīgāthā is especially significant because it preserves verses attributed to Buddhist nuns and provides insight into their personal experiences, struggles, realizations, and aspirations for liberation. These literary testimonies demonstrate that women were represented as capable of understanding Buddhist teachings and engaging seriously in religious practice. Their contributions therefore extended beyond supporting the Buddhist community and included direct participation in the pursuit and expression of religious knowledge and spiritual liberation.

The study also concludes that women's contributions should be understood within the historical, social, institutional, and literary contexts of early Buddhism. The Pāli texts contain both evidence of women's religious agency and descriptions of institutional regulations that shaped their participation in Buddhist communities. A careful reading of these sources makes it possible to recognize the complexity of women's religious lives without separating them from the social conditions of their period. Women contributed to early Buddhism through monastic life, lay devotion, patronage, education, meditation, literary expression, and participation in religious communities. Their stories also enrich the understanding of important Buddhist concepts such as impermanence, suffering, non-attachment, mindfulness, wisdom, and liberation. The study therefore emphasizes the importance of giving greater scholarly attention to women when examining the history and development of early Buddhism. Further research using interdisciplinary methods and comparative Buddhist sources can expand understanding of these contributions. Overall, Pāli literature provides an important foundation for recognizing the varied religious roles of women and for developing a more comprehensive historical and literary understanding of early Buddhist traditions.

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