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Reflection of Rural Economy in the Proverbs of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Proverbs condense the everyday experience of a people into brief, memorable forms of wisdom, and they preserve traces of a nation's identity, history, and culture. Accumulated across generations, this experience has been transmitted orally as short sayings and, more recently, recorded in the regional collections published by the Bangla Academy. Despite the abundance of collected material, Bengali literary scholarship has devoted little sustained critical analysis to these proverbs, and their classification has lacked a systematic method. The most significant gap in existing work is the absence of a comprehensive examination of the philosophical perspectives that the proverbs embody. This study addresses that gap by examining the realist philosophical outlook expressed in the economy-related proverbs of Bangladesh. Employing descriptive and analytical methods, it analyzes sixteen proverbs selected from the Bangla Academy's district-wise volumes. Because a significant portion of Bangladesh's population resides in rural areas, these proverbs reflect the economic realities and the philosophy of rural society, and their critical analysis illuminates how rural communities understand labor, thrift, consumption, property, and social obligation. The findings may offer valuable insights for policies and initiatives aimed at the country's overall socio-economic development.

Keywords

Analytical Research Method, Descriptive Research Method, Folklore, Proverbs of Bangladesh, Realist Philosophy, Rural Economy

1. Introduction

Folklore is a major repository of a nation's life, culture, collective experience, and intellectual heritage. Among its genres, proverbs occupy a particularly significant position. A proverb distills the accumulated experience, observation, practical

wisdom, and social values of a community into a concise form. It is not the creation of an individual but the product of collective social experience, and through oral transmission across generations it becomes an integral part of cultural heritage. Mieder defined a proverb as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (Mieder, 2004). In other words, a proverb is a concise, widely recognized, and memorable expression through which a community articulates its wisdom, moral values, and traditional views.

Bangladesh is predominantly an agrarian and labor-based society. Its economic life is deeply rooted in agriculture, fisheries, trade and commerce, handicrafts, labor, production, and resource management. Consequently, a substantial number of the proverbs that circulate in Bengali folk society are closely associated with economic activity. These proverbs contain practical lessons on hard work, honesty, frugality, planning, productivity, and risk management, all of which have evolved through generations of collective social experience. Economy-related proverbs are therefore not merely rhetorical devices; they constitute reflections of a society's economic culture and its philosophy of life. They make a multifaceted contribution to rural Bangladeshi society. First, they cultivate an appreciation of the dignity and value of labor among individuals and families. Second, they promote the values of saving and frugality. Third, they foster honesty, fairness, and responsibility within the community. Finally, beyond the scope of formal economic education, they serve as an important source of practical economic knowledge for people with limited access to schooling.

Research on economy-related proverbs in Bangladesh has become increasingly necessary in the contemporary era. Globalization, technological advancement, and the expansion of the market economy have brought rapid transformations to social life, and as a consequence, folk knowledge, oral traditions, and proverbs are increasingly at risk of being forgotten. These proverbs preserve valuable records of Bengal's economic history, its agrarian production system, its labor culture, its resource-management practices, and the social values that have shaped economic relationships. Although a number of linguistic and folkloristic studies of Bengali proverbs have been conducted, few examine them through the lenses of economics and realist philosophy. Research in this area would therefore not only contribute to the preservation of Bangladesh's folk heritage but also open new avenues for interdisciplinary inquiry into the country's economics, sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies. This article addresses that gap, and Section 2 presents and analyzes sixteen economy-related proverbs drawn from the Bangla Academy's district volumes, and Section 3 draws conclusions.

2. Analysis of Economy Related Proverbs

The Bangla Academy has published a rich collection of regional proverbs, sayings, and aphorisms in its series *Bangladesher Lokoj Sangskritik Granthamala: Probad*

Sankalan [Folk Cultural Series of Bangladesh: Proverb Collection]. The series comprises 64 volumes, one for each district of Bangladesh, and the volumes consulted for this study are listed in the References. From these volumes, we selected sixteen of the most salient economy-related proverbs. Each proverb is presented in the original Bangla, followed by a transliteration and an English translation, and is then examined from economic and philosophical perspectives.

Original Bangla Proverb: গরিবেরা জানে ছেঁড়া ক্যাথার আরাম। (Khan, 2019a)
Transliteration: gariberā jāne chneṛā kyāthār ārām.
English Translation: The poor know how comfortable a patched quilt can be.

This proverb implies that those who have lived through poverty and hardship best understand a life of deprivation and the satisfaction that limited means can bring. Such people also appreciate the true value of modest wealth. The experience of hardship, in other words, cultivates practical wisdom, adaptability, and self-restraint. The proverb is closely associated with poverty, resource scarcity, the utility of material possessions, and the efficient use of limited resources. From an economic perspective, individuals with scarce resources tend to recognize the value of every possession more acutely. Poverty teaches people to distinguish between necessities and luxuries and encourages them to maximize utility even from meager resources. The proverb thus underscores the importance of frugality, moderation, and the prudent use of available resources.

The realities of life are often understood most clearly through experiences of deprivation and struggle. The prosperity of a life depends less on an abundance of wealth than on the fulfillment of basic needs. People who have faced difficulties can better appreciate the scarcity of wealth and opportunity, and this understanding helps them develop a realistic view of life. Scarcity teaches them to be content with limited means while recognizing the value of what they possess.

Original Bangla Proverb: কাজ নেই হাত আছে,
খেটে খেলে ভাত আছে। (Khan, 2018a)
Transliteration: kāj nei, hāt āche,
kheṭe khele bhāt āche
English Translation: If you have hands, you have work;
if you work, you will have food.

This proverb expresses the dignity of labor, self-reliance, and the worth of productive work. A person can earn a livelihood through hard work, which requires physical ability, skill, and determination. The proverb illustrates that diligence is essential both to earning a living and to success in life. It also reflects a view of human life grounded in the realities of the material world, in which progress depends not on fate but on personal will, hard work, and capability. Moreover, it urges people to use their labor and skill rather than lament the lack of opportunities. The proverb, which originates in the district of Jashore, therefore promotes diligence, self-confidence, and self-reliance at both the individual and the societal

level. It implies that those who work hard can earn an honorable livelihood, whereas idleness inevitably leads to economic hardship. In this sense, labor is presented as humanity's most valuable form of capital, and self-reliance and industriousness are portrayed as the essential foundations of economic success and a life of dignity.

Original Bangla Proverb: এতকাল দেখলাম ছিড়া খ্যাতা
আজকে দেখি ফুটানি কথা। (Khan, 2014b)
Transliteration: etokāl dekhlām chneṛā khytā,
āke dekhi phuṭāni kathā.
English Translation: All these years we saw a tattered rag;
now all we see are airs and swagger.

This proverb suggests that a person who has long lived in poverty or ordinary circumstances may become arrogant after acquiring a modest amount of wealth, influence, or success. It criticizes the misuse of newly acquired resources and the tendency toward vanity and self-promotion. The proverb also touches on behavioral economics, conspicuous consumption, and financial judgment, as people often display their means to enhance their social status when their financial situation improves. Such imprudent behavior may erode savings and limit the capacity to invest. A balance among income, expenditure, and saving is therefore needed if economic-progress is to remain sustainable.

Thorstein Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class holds that people acquire possessions not only to meet their needs but also to display wealth and claim social status (Veblen, 1994). This perspective corresponds to the central message of the proverb, which discourages people from accumulating property for display and self-promotion. A person's real worth should be measured by character, productive effort, and practical wisdom rather than by transient material possessions. A sudden rise in fortune does not guarantee lasting prosperity; genuine prosperity is achieved when wealth is accompanied by humility, self-restraint, and sound judgment.

Original Bangla Proverb: চাষ করে বাগদা, ফুলে-ভাইপে জাবদা।
(Khan, 2014h)
Transliteration: cāṣ kāre bāgdā,
phule-bhāipe jābdā.
English Translation: One cultivates the tiger prawn, while another
enjoys the feast.

This proverb expresses the idea that a person who labors to achieve something may be unable to enjoy its benefits, since one person works while another reaps the reward. It thus addresses the distribution of income, incentives, and fair compensation for labor. In the proverb, bāgdā (বাগদা) refers to a farmer, and jābdā (জাবদা) means a written account, record, or ledger.

From the standpoint of economic reality, workers become demoralized when

they do not receive the rewards they expect for their efforts. In agrarian communities, farmers often fail to obtain a fair price for their produce because intermediaries capture most of the profit margin. Sustainable economic development requires that hard work yield a fair return. Adam Smith observed that "the annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life" (Smith, 1981), which indicates that labor is the principal foundation of economic progress and deserves reward and recognition. Yet social discrimination, power, and position can prevent people from obtaining the outcomes they have earned, and the proverb illustrates this social reality clearly. It insists on a just distribution of economic benefits.

Original Bangla Proverb: দুই দিনের বৈরাগী
ভাতেরে কয় অন্ন। (Khan, 2019b)
Transliteration: dui diner bairāgī,
bhātere kay anna.
English Translation: A two-day ascetic calls cooked rice by the name anna.

This proverb describes a less experienced person, or one who succeeds with little effort, who behaves as though he or she knows and can do everything. It expresses the idea that limited experience combined with early success may breed excessive confidence, leading a person to pose as an expert despite modest experience and ability.

From an economic viewpoint, the proverb carries several implications. Economics emphasizes the importance of experience and the proper use of wealth, and sustainable economic development depends on patience, experience, and continuous effort rather than on temporary gain or short-term success. In the view of realist philosophy, moreover, truth and knowledge are validated by lived experience and real undertakings; genuine knowledge and sound judgment are built on practical experience, observation, and continuous learning. The proverb thus warns against the pride that springs from inadequate experience, and it teaches that practical knowledge, sound judgment, and long-term experience are needed for sustainable economic progress.

Original Bangla Proverb: আগে আছলায় কুমারর ঝি, অখন কও সরারে ঘি।
(Khan, 2014i)
Transliteration: āge āchlāẏ kumārer jhi,
akhan kau sarāre ghi.
English Translation: Once she was the potter's poor daughter; now she asks for clarified butter with every meal.

This proverb expresses the idea that a person who was once poor and helpless may, after a sudden improvement in circumstances, become arrogant and adopt a luxurious way of life. People often forget their bitter past and grow excessively proud even of modest wealth and social status. The phrase kumārer jhi (কুমারের ঝি) refers to the daughter of a potter, that is, a person of low social and economic

standing, and sarāre ghi (সরারে ঘি) refers to ghee served in a clay vessel, symbolizing luxury or prosperity. From the standpoint of behavioral economics, rising income, patterns of consumption, and changes in lifestyle are closely related: as income increases, people tend to spend beyond their actual needs and to prioritize luxury goods. Such imprudent behavior reduces savings and exposes the person to economic risk.

From an economic perspective, income, expenditure, and saving should remain in balance: as income and expenses rise, savings should also rise at a corresponding rate to secure lasting economic development. People should remain humble, honor their past, and live within their actual means. A sudden surge of wealth should not be mistaken for a permanent improvement in economic circumstances. Real wisdom lies in the frugal use of wealth, gratitude, and foresight. Benjamin Franklin expressed a similar idea: "Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship" (Franklin, 1986). An expenditure may seem negligible, yet over the long run it can gradually undermine financial stability. The proverb thus cautions that modest economic advancement should not lead to an arrogant way of life.

Original Bangla Proverb: অল্প পাইসা যার
ঘ্যাগা বাইগন তার। (Khan, 2014e)
Transliteration: alpa paisā yār,
ghyāgā bāigan tār.
English Translation: One with little money must settle for wormy eggplants.

This proverb, collected from the district of Lalmonirhat, expresses the principle that a person should live within his or her means. One's choice of consumption is determined by income and available resources. The expression ghyāgā bāigan (ঘ্যাগা বাইগন), meaning wormy eggplant, symbolizes a cheap, low-priced product and an alternative chosen in time of need. The proverb is thus closely related to purchasing power, budget constraints, the scope of expenditure, and consumer choice.

From an economic perspective, every consumer lives within the limits of his or her income and must select goods and services that fit the budget. Consumers with lower incomes choose cheaper products rather than luxuries in order to maximize utility. The proverb reflects the economic principle that reasonable consumption requires a balance between unlimited wants and limited means. This message corresponds to the maxim, popularized by Milton Friedman (Friedman,1975), that there is no such thing as a free lunch: every benefit or act of consumption carries a cost. A person with limited income should therefore be prudent in spending. Viewed philosophically, one's life-style should be adjusted to one's economic capacity; a person who tries to live beyond limited means risks debt, financial insecurity, and economic instability. The proverb thus teaches that income and consumption should be kept in check and in balance.

Original Bangla Proverb: তুই দোষী না
আমার কপাল দোষী
তুই আম খা
আমি বড়া চোষী। (Khan, 2013b)

Transliteration: tui doṣī nā,
āmār kapāl doṣī.
tui ām khā,
āmi baṛā coṣī.

English Translation: It is not your fault;
my fortune is to blame.
The mangoes are yours;
mine, the leftover mango stones.

This regional proverb from the district of Mymensingh insists that one should not blame others for one's misfortune or lack of opportunity. Fortune, opportunity, and economic circumstances determine who gains an opportunity and who does not, and when one person succeeds, others often fail to appreciate the hard work behind that success. The proverb thus illustrates the disparity between opportunity and the distribution of wealth.

From an economic perspective, people do not begin life with equal capital, education, and wealth. Some are fortunate enough to seize opportunities easily, whereas others must rely on hard work and patience under constrained conditions to succeed. Unequal opportunity produces unequal outcomes. This insight corresponds to Amartya Sen's (Sen,1999) conception of poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely a lack of income, which indicates that disadvantage extends beyond income to include the opportunities, education, and abilities necessary for a fulfilling life.

Philosophically, the course of a human life is shaped not only by individual effort but also by environment, opportunity, and economic and social conditions. People should not simply surrender to fortune but should strive to improve their circumstances even in a hostile environment. Similar views appear in John Rawls's (Rawls, 1999) A Theory of Justice, which argues that a just society should minimize inequality of opportunity so that a person's prospects are not determined by birth or social status.

Original Bangla Proverb: থাকলে পরের বাপের শ্রাদ্ধ হয়, না থাকলে নিজের
বাপেরও শ্রাদ্ধ হয় না। (Khan, 2014f)

Transliteration: thākle parer bāper śrāddha hay,
nā thākle nijer bāpero śrāddha hay nā.

English Translation: With money, one can perform the funeral rites (śrāddha) of a neighbor's father; without it, one cannot perform even those of one's own father.

Members of a society sometimes suffer deprivation and fail to meet their most basic responsibilities. Those with sufficient wealth and resources stand beside

those in need and help them meet basic needs, regarding this as a duty to society. The proverb thus raises the economic point that people require financial solvency to fulfill their personal, social, and family responsibilities; without financial support, a person cannot perform his or her duties to family and society. Financial stability is therefore necessary for personal and social welfare. This view is reflected in Adam Smith's assertion that "no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members is poor and miserable" (Smith, 1981: p. 96). Poverty, in other words, undermines not only personal wellbeing but also social flourishing and resilience.

Viewed philosophically, good intentions alone are not enough to discharge one's responsibilities; practical capability and sufficient material means are also required. Such obligations cannot be fulfilled through moral commitment alone but demand adequate economic resources. This outlook encourages people to weigh their real circumstances alongside their aspirations.

Original Bangla Proverb: টেকা আলার টেকা
আর মুরগি আলার ডিম। (Khan, 2018b)
Transliteration: tekā ālār ṭekā,
ār murgi ālār ḍim.
English Translation: Money belongs to its owner while eggs belong to the owner of the hen.

This proverb from the district of Bogura expresses the principle that property rights belong to the legitimate owner and that one should not covet or unlawfully claim another's property. The word ālār (আলার) means "belonging to another". The proverb thus articulates an economic concept: respect for property rights and for the rightful owner's claim to his or her property.

In economic terms, secure property rights are essential to production, saving, and investment. When people are confident that their wealth and earnings will be protected, they are motivated to engage in productive work and future investment. The proverb thus expresses a foundational principle of economic life, namely the right to property. The idea is reflected in John Locke's theory of property, which holds that "every man has a property in his own person" (Locke, 1988). This statement implies that a person has a right to the products of his or her own labor. Social harmony and justice, in turn, depend on respect for legitimate rights.

Original Bangla Proverb: সরকারে খায় মোছইদে আযান দেয়। (Khan, 2014d)
Transliteration: sarkāre khāy, mocāide ājān dey.
English Translation: He eats at the government's table but gives the call to prayer from the mosque.

The literal meaning of this proverb is that a person earns a livelihood from one institution while rendering service to another. Such conduct is ungrateful and unethical, and people should not engage in it. The term mocāide (মোছইদে) refers to the muazzin, the person who gives the Islamic call to prayer. The proverb thus condemns selfish, unprofessional, and unethical behavior.

From an economic perspective, an employee should be loyal to the institution that provides his or her salary and other economic support, obey the employer, and perform duties faithfully. Society should not condone an employee who acts against the interests of the organization, since such misconduct erodes the organization's resources and competence. This situation is reflected in Adam Smith's moral philosophy, which stresses that sustainable social and economic relationships depend on moral conduct, trust, and a sense of responsibility (Smith, 1981: pp. 9-23).

From a philosophical standpoint, rights and responsibilities are inseparable: those who receive benefits from an institution or society have corresponding obligations toward it. When a person neglects those responsibilities or places personal interest above duty, the individual or the community may suffer. The proverb therefore warns of the need for honesty and accountability toward the institution that provides one's livelihood.

Original Bangla Proverb: বাইই গোস্ত
অর্থ ছাড়া দোস্ত। (Khan, 2014g)
Transliteration: bāii gosta,
artha chāṛā dost.
English Translation: Where there is money, there are friends.

This proverb conveys the idea that wealth and material interests attract friends, companions, and associates, and that when wealth or personal advantage disappears, many of these relationships fade as well. It offers a realistic observation that human relationships are frequently shaped, directly or indirectly, by economic interests and personal gain.

From an economic perspective, decisions taken by individuals or institutions may be influenced by self-interest or mutual benefit. Wealth, financial resources, and economic opportunities tend to attract business partners, collaborators, and social networks, and relationships built on material interest often prove fragile and unsustainable. A similar idea appears in Adam Smith's well-known observation: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" (Smith, 1982). This statement illustrates that economic relations are largely motivated by self-interest, and the central message of the proverb aligns with it.

Philosophically, human behavior is often grounded in self-interest and practical need. The proverb distinguishes personal friendship from relationships founded on material interest. Economic interests undoubtedly shape many social interactions, yet genuine friendship cannot rest solely on personal advantage; it requires sincerity, commitment, and mutual trust. Aristotle similarly argued that friendship in its complete form cannot be extended to many people (Aristotle, 1999). The proverb accordingly recognizes that wealth and self-interest influence human relationships, while genuine friendship rests on honesty, loyalty, and reciprocal trust.

Original Bangla Proverb: নুন আনত পানতা ফুরায়।
Transliteration: nun ānte pāntā phurāẏ. (Khan, 2014j)
English Translation: Before the salt arrives, the meal is over.

The literal meaning of this proverb is that a person or family with deficient income cannot afford even the necessities of life: when they try to secure one thing, they find themselves lacking another. This is an extreme scenario of poverty. The proverb portrays budget limitation, poverty, and the economics of household consumption.

From an economic perspective, people with limited income are compelled to prioritize among the essential needs of life; if they secure one basic need, they must forgo another because of resource scarcity. The proverb reflects the fundamental economic principle that finite resources cannot satisfy infinite wants. It also highlights the concept of opportunity cost: allocating scarce resources to one necessity reduces the ability to acquire another. Such households must keep a prudent budget that does not depend on desire and maintain disciplined spending of limited means. The proverb also points to the need to expand economic facilities so that all citizens have easy access to essential needs and poverty can be addressed.

Original Bangla Proverb: মাথাত চুল থাকলে
যে কোন পাকায়
সেতি কারাহা যায়। (Khan, 2014c)
Transliteration: māthāt cul thākle,
je kono pākāẏ,
seti kārāhā yāẏ.
English Translation: Where there is hair, it will one day turn grey.

This proverb, collected from the district of Dinajpur, suggests that opportunity, beauty, and strength inevitably decay over time. Those who possess latent wealth or social standing often become the objects of criticism, jealousy, or competition. The proverb insists that change is a natural process: just as hair turns grey with age, material possessions, human abilities, and social circumstances are all subject to transformation.

In economic terms, no asset or form of capital retains its value indefinitely: physical assets depreciate, technologies become obsolete, and knowledge and human physical strength decline over a lifetime. The proverb urges people to regard change positively in both personal and social life. This insight is reflected in Joseph Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction, the process by which economic progress continually replaces outdated structures with new ones (Schumpeter, 2008). Recognizing and adapting to necessary change is thus the mark of practical wisdom and sustainable development.

Original Bangla Proverb: ঘরে উন্দুর পরে আর মরে। (Khan, 2014a)
Transliteration: ghare undur paṛe ār mare.
English Translation: There is not even enough food in the house for the mice to survive.

This proverb, from the district of Barguna, portrays extreme poverty. Its literal meaning is that a household suffers such severe deprivation that even the mice that live on leftover food cannot survive. It is a powerful metaphor for acute economic hardship and chronic scarcity, and it highlights resource scarcity, food insecurity, and the struggle for survival.

From an economic perspective, the proverb expresses the idea that a family unable to secure food and other necessities falls into absolute poverty. Such a condition lowers not only the standard of living but also productive labor, educational attainment, and future earning capacity. Prolonged financial weakness creates a vicious circle that is difficult to escape without institutional support and adequate opportunity. The proverb therefore points to the need for poverty alleviation, job creation, and food and social security.

From the standpoint of realist philosophy, the proverb acknowledges the harsh realities of material deprivation. It motivates individuals and society to take practical measures, rather than rely on abstract ideals, to eliminate poverty. Collective action, supported by sound economic institutions and effective social support systems, is necessary to combat it.

Original Bangla Proverb: সখের তোলা আশি টাকা। (Khan, 2013a)
Transliteration: sakher tolā āśi ṭākā.
English Translation: Indulgence comes at a high price.

This proverb, collected from the district of Jamalpur, portrays people who spend heavily to satisfy personal desires rather than to meet basic needs, and who do so without hesitation. Pleasure has a price, and acquiring luxuries demands considerable financial outlay. There is a boundary between desire and need, which consumers draw according to their own choices, their capacity to bear the expense, and behavioral-economic considerations.

In economics, essential demand differs from optional desire. Spending on optional or luxury items carries an opportunity cost, because the same funds could be devoted to necessities, saving, or productive investment. Personal indulgence may weaken financial security and reduce future financial opportunity. The proverb thus reflects the economic principle that rational consumption requires careful consideration of the tradeoffs involved in allocating limited resources. The desire for comfort and enjoyment is a general feature of human life, but it should remain within the limits of one's economic capacity. Pursuing luxury beyond one's means may result in misfortune, financial crisis, and needless suffering.

3. Conclusion

The economy-related proverbs of Bangladesh are an important asset of the country. They store the economic experiences, struggles for survival, social values, and practical wisdom of the Bengali people, and they express the concepts of agrarian economy, labor, production, saving, frugality, trade and commerce, and resource management. These proverbs serve not only as a repository of indigenous knowledge but also as a reliable source of practical economic principles, and their influence

in Bangladeshi society is multidimensional. They play an important role in shaping the economic behavior of individuals, families, and society. In rural areas in particular, where institutional economic facilities are limited, proverbs are a principal means of conveying economic knowledge. They foster self-reliance, patience, prudence, and responsibility, and they strengthen mutual cooperation, social cohesion, and ethical economic behavior. Economy-related proverbs are thus not merely cultural artifacts but are also relevant to contemporary society. An analysis of these proverbs through realist philosophy yields deep insight into economic thought, social values, and cultural identity. Further comprehensive and rigorous analytical study of proverbs in domains other than the economy is therefore needed, both to appreciate their scholarly contribution and to safeguard these valuable cultural resources of Bangladesh.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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