

Gender, Development Induced Displacement, and Resistance: Women Uprooted by River Erosion in West Bengal and Bangladesh

By

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Abstract: Approximately three quarters of the world refugee and IDP population is comprised of women and children. Due to numerous factors, including restricted access to employment, resources and education, inadequate reproductive health care, and exclusion from matters of decision making, women constitute one of the most vulnerable categories among the internally displaced.¹ In South Asia particularly, the power of the state is always weighted largely against women, and women often end up being the worst victims of the phenomenon of displacement. In spite of their victimisation, displaced women are often seen to create and organise movements for seeking justice. Hence, displaced women should never only be viewed as victims, as doing so would be a negation of their experiences and agency.² Recurrent river erosion on the banks of south western Bangladesh in areas such as Khulna has resulted, since early 2000, in a massive displacement of the local population due to different development projects, for example, shrimp farming. Simultaneously, the slow but steady erosion of the river Ganges, owing to the construction of the Farakka Barrage in the district of Malda in West Bengal, India, has resulted in the people residing in the area losing their homes. This paper will draw upon archival sources of data – national and state government reports on policy and planning, district human development reports, reports generated by non-governmental organisations (both local and international) working in the river erosion affected areas of Malda and Khulna, the UN Charters on Internal Displacement, news material from national and sub-national dailies, and local newspapers published in

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Malda and Khulna – to examine the impact of river erosion induced displacement on the lives of women. It will also explore how these women have emerged as forces of resistance to the process of displacement instead of being victimised by it. In what ways do women depend on resettlement policies undertaken by the government and other organisations for their well-being? How do they cope, and what are the means by and through which they combat the phenomenon of displacement?

Keywords: Displacement, forced migration, development, resistance, coping mechanisms

Introduction: Locating Gender and Development in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

In South Asia, the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is very challenging as they are often unable to migrate from sites of conflict unlike refugees, and they have to remain within the confines of a state that compels them to move in the first place. The category of IDPs in South Asia was accorded visibility during the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Towards the end of 1995, Sri Lanka was home to more than one million IDPs. It was around this time that there was a growing international recognition of the fact that women IDPs constitute a unique category on account of their sheer number³. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which were drafted around this period paid attention to the crucial fact that ‘the overwhelming majority of the internally displaced are women and their dependent children’⁴.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement define as well as outline the rights of IDPs. According to the Guiding Principles, IDPs are, ‘persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human made disasters and who have not crossed an Internationally recognized State border’⁵. These principles are primarily addressed to governments with the point of departure being a ‘positive notion of sovereignty not as a barrier to the realization of rights but as an affirmative duty.’⁶

Principle 3 of the Guiding Principles states that ‘National authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction.’⁷ The Guiding Principles places the responsibility for observing the rights articulated by them not only to governments but to ‘all authorities, groups and persons irrespective of their legal status’⁸ (Principal 2). The Guiding Principles thus address civil society, humanitarian organisations, rebel groups, and any other entities or persons that might have an impact on the displaced. Such an approach builds on the principles of humanitarian law which bind both state forces and rebel armies in situations of armed conflict along with modern trends in international law, thereby extending their reach

beyond national authorities to include other entities, even individuals.⁹ This has resulted in the increasing application of international criminal law to specific crimes committed against humanity.¹⁰

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement have made every effort to prioritise gender issues.¹¹ Principal 11 of the Guiding Principles calls for the protection of IDPs from acts of violence that are gender specific in nature, in addition to forced prostitution, and all other forms of indecent assault.¹² Principle 18 proposes that special efforts are to be made for ensuring the full participation of displaced women in planning and distributing basic supplies such as sanitation and essential medical services, appropriate clothing, basic housing, potable water, and essential food items.¹³ Principle 19 states that special attention must be paid to the medical needs of internally displaced women, including access to female healthcare services and providers along with appropriate counselling for displaced women who are victims of sexual or any other kind of abuse.¹⁴ According to Principle 20 both men and women must have equal rights for obtaining documents that are necessary for enjoying and exercising legal rights such as marriage certificates, birth certificates, personal identification documents, and passports. They shall also enjoy the right to have these documents issued in their very own names.¹⁵

Principal 23 of the Guiding Principles calls for special efforts to be made in ensuring the full as well as equal participation of girls and women in educational programs. It also states that whenever conditions permit, training and education facilities should be made accessible to IDPs, particularly women and adolescents, irrespective of whether they reside in camps or not.¹⁶ In addition to the UN Guiding Principles, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Optional Protocol of 1999 have played a significant role in guiding national governments to undertake proactive measures in reducing discrimination faced by displaced women.

In present times, people who are displaced by development projects or development initiatives 'represent the single largest sub category within the global totality of IDP's with most left impoverished by the experience.'¹⁷ It is therefore considered necessary 'to fully mobilize the social science conceptual and operational tools available to address involuntary population displacement and resettlement.'¹⁸ Originally, the UN Guiding Principles were not composed to address every issue associated with development induced displacement. However, they are applicable to and relevant for displacement that is brought about by development projects. Principles 7, 9, 18, 28, and 29 are in accordance with the guidelines of the World Bank in relation to involuntary settlement.¹⁹

When it comes to development induced displacement, a middle ground approach has been adopted by many states. The states are, on the one hand, open to the idea of receiving external technical assistance and funding for launching development projects. On the other hand, however, when development projects are executed and displacement occurs, accompanied by evidence of impoverishment, denial of rights as well as arbitrary treatment of displaced people, the states may oppose any outside remedies or advice.²⁰

The international community is therefore challenged to locate mechanisms for effective and adequate international response, at a time when actions of the nation state appear ineffective and there is considerable suffering among the persons concerned.²¹

Including development induced displacement within the framework of the UN Guiding Principles poses numerous challenges to the representative of the UN Secretary General as well as to several UN and other international agencies and non-governmental organisations that are concerned with the problems of IDPs.²² Firstly, the number of people around the world who ought to be counted as IDPs under this framework shall result in the addition of at least ten million people on a yearly basis to the already existing estimates of people displaced by conflict.²³ Secondly, it will lead to a loss of coherence where the protection regime is concerned. The causes of development projects are often quite varied as is the number of people who are affected by them. It would therefore be difficult to apply the Guiding Principles in every situation of development induced displacement. Thirdly, if the definition of IDPs was to include development induced displacement, there would be considerable resistance from the states as they may fear that this 'would give considerable scope to the International community to find pretexts to interfere in their domestic affairs'.²⁴ While the states are usually willing to assist and rehabilitate victims of natural disasters and may even provide aid to conflict induced IDPs when it is in their interests to do so, it has been noted that 'Governments naturally fight harder to maintain the concept of national sovereignty when the perpetrator of displacement is the State itself'.²⁵

Development is often regarded as a right to which the entire population of a country ought to have access. At the same time, people also have the right to protection from the negative effects of development such as the loss of political, civil, social and economic rights, and arbitrary eviction. The goal of evolving international norms and guidelines is to improve lives and livelihoods before and during displacement, which should be both a participatory and transparent process.²⁶ It is therefore an imperative for national governments to familiarise themselves with the UN Guiding Principles and its provisions that apply to development projects, and also to incorporate these Principles, together with the guidelines of the World Bank, into their own laws and policies. National Action Plans on Human Rights, which include provisions for preventing and protecting people from arbitrary displacement brought about by development, should also be adopted.²⁷

Gender and Displacement in South Asia: A Brief Overview

South Asia has witnessed an enormous rise in internal displacement over the last two decades. IDPs in South Asia are in fact more susceptible to danger than refugees because of a dearth of legal mechanisms to guide their care and rehabilitation.²⁸ The bodies of women often serve as a battleground for the contestation of male power²⁹. It has been observed that 'mystified notions of chastity' have guided the attitude towards women in South Asia³⁰. As a result,

it has been widely accepted that women 'belong' entirely to their communities. In South Asia, women are often tortured, molested, and raped to shame men.³¹ The notion of honour is often played up by the media to incite groups of people against each other. For instance, after the Godhra genocide, false media reports of Hindu women being raped by Muslim men resulted in Muslim women being targeted during the riots.³²

Women are both patronised and abused by states in South Asia, which is clearly evident in many state responses to the displacement of women.³³ In Sri Lanka, the state was unwilling to involve any women's groups in peace talks notwithstanding Resolution 1325 of the UN. In India, when the issue of women's torture in Gujarat was raised in the parliament, the Defence Minister commented that such things happen in civil war³⁴. Women in most South Asian societies reside under rigid patriarchal conditions in which they are valued solely as symbols of honour in their communities, which control and limit their mobility in many different ways. When affected by state policies, these women are often unprepared to deal with administrative authorities, which make them more vulnerable in the system. State policies seldom acknowledge that populations that become displaced are mostly feminine populations. Rehabilitation programs for the displaced are therefore generally gender-neutral in nature³⁵.

Apathy concerning the specific needs of displaced women can thus be evident even during the organisation processes of resettlement camps. State authorities very easily invoke the national security rationale when they are criticised by human rights groups for their insufficient or misguided efforts and policies towards the displaced. In doing so, they often successfully manage to divert attention away from the unsatisfactory conditions of the displaced women. This is clearly evident, for example, in the case of people who are displaced along the line of control or the LOC between Pakistan and India.³⁶ The right to define what national security entails is always appropriated by the state. If a minority or a group of tribal women suffer, their sacrifices are justified in the nation's name³⁷. It is often the female minority population that gets displaced, for instance, the Adivasi³⁸, Muslim and tribal women in India³⁹, the ethnic minority women in Burma⁴⁰, the Tamil women in Sri Lanka⁴¹, the Tibeto-Burman women in Nepal⁴², and the Jumma women in Bangladesh⁴³.

The various efforts made by displaced women to cope with their plight shows that they are more than mere victims of the phenomenon of displacement. Women IDPs in the resettlement camps focus their energies on raising their children as if they were in a stable and safe environment.⁴⁴ In the IDP camps in Sri Lanka women have sought more actively work than men.⁴⁵ In Gujarat, women in the camps have been continuously looking for work.⁴⁶ Women are said to maintain cohesiveness within the family by continuously assessing the situation and considering it as their duty to provide their dependents with financial aid as well as emotional security.⁴⁷ An analyst has noted with regard to displaced women in Sri Lanka that 'displacement and camp life had also provided spaces for empowerment of several Tamil

Women who had taken on the role of head of household for various reasons'.⁴⁸

Protest movements among the displaced in South Asia are largely organised by women. Notwithstanding their trauma and personal loss, it is the displaced women who usually take the initiative to organise movements for peace and justice.⁴⁹ During the Narmada Bachao Andolan, that is, the Save Narmada movement, women protested against the state repression even in the face of severe reprisals and human rights abuses⁵⁰. In Gujarat, women IDPs rallied under the banner of Women for Peace.⁵¹ They organised camps where women underwent blood tests to show their communities that blood groups were independent of either caste or religion⁵². Women's groups along the Thai-Burmese border are known to often provide aid to the incoming refugee women⁵³. In Burma, women sometimes travel to the conflict zones to help other women in these areas in spite of huge risks that this poses to their own lives.⁵⁴

Understanding River Erosion Induced Displacement in West Bengal and Bangladesh

Constant river erosion along the banks of south western Bangladesh in areas such as Khulna has contributed to large scale displacement among the local population since the early 2000. Simultaneously, the slow but steady erosion of the river Ganges in the district of Malda in the Indian state of West Bengal has resulted in many people becoming displaced and destitute. According to the stricter definitions of IDPs, their displacement may not be considered as politically sensitive as displacement caused by civil war, occupation, or aggression.⁵⁵ Women and their dependent children constitute a majority of the displaced population in both regions. It is the displaced women in these areas who are made to bear the greatest brunt of displacement – they are often left to fend for themselves and their offspring when their husbands migrate to other areas in search of economic opportunities.⁵⁶

Although river erosion was a phenomenon well known in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, notably in the districts of Khulna and Malda since the 1980s, the problem became much more acute in the early years of the 21st century, owing to the advent of many large-scale developmental projects, which prompted state authorities in both areas to take notice of the severity of the problem. The first *National Adaptation Program of Action* for dealing with the consequences of climate change was brought out by the Ministry of Environment and Forest of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in a report published in 2005. According to the report, the geographical setting of Bangladesh makes the country highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Every year one or more natural calamities are known to upset the people of the country. Some of the major natural hazards listed in the report are tornadoes, earthquakes, landslides, drought, flash floods, drought and storm surges, and finally, river bank erosion. In the case of Khulna in particular, the trend of saline intrusion since 2003, is quite significant, facilitating large scale river erosion. What makes saline intrusion so evident in this case is the fact that the

main power stations in Khulna need to collect fresh water in order to cool their boilers by sending a barge upstream to get fresh water. Over the last decade, the barge has had to go further and further upstream in order to get suitably fresh water for the purpose. An important factor for saline intrusion, as mentioned in the report, is the withdrawal of water at the Farakka barrage by India to divert the water flows to Calcutta. The report mentions that the livelihoods and everyday lives of people who are already affected by river erosion are likely to become severely impacted if, and when more than half of their land will submerge below water.

According to the *Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan* (2008) by the Ministry of Environment and Forest's Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, a comprehensive study will be carried out on the impact of river erosion on women and gender relations, on the basis of which specific recommendations will be developed to address the main problems. However, hitherto no report has been generated on this comprehensive study, and local newspapers such as the *Daily Star*, *Bangladesh Today*, and the *Dhaka Tribune* have not reported on the impact of river erosion on women or provided any evidence of gender sensitivity in resettlement policies.

The *District Human Development Report for Malda*, prepared by the Government of West Bengal in 2006, states that river erosion has been occurring since the early 19th century. However, in the early years of the 21st century the problem has taken a serious turn due to the construction of the Farakka barrage. When investigations on human vulnerability in the area were conducted by the drafters of the report, it was found that there were two main kinds of losses among the displaced people. One was the complete destruction of their assets such as the sweeping away of numerous equipments by rivers or the collapse of their houses, and the second was major damage unfolding to their properties or assets, for instance, to a house, a vehicle or other equipment in a manner which resulted in a substantial loss in its value. Because of river erosion, many erstwhile cultivators in the survey region have been reduced to landlessness. Most of the respondent households now depend on wage labour for either their primary or secondary livelihoods, while only a few of them practice agriculture in any form. The majority of the households are now dependent on artisanship and trade. With their livelihood choices becoming limited, less than half of the respondents reported any earnings from a secondary occupation. The report does not provide any information on how women in the surveyed areas are specifically impacted by river erosion or how it possibly affects the women's efforts to take care of their families.

It is important to note that between 2000 and 2010 international and domestic provisions for the protection of the IDPs were widened in both India and Bangladesh, as an addition to the fundamental rights already effective for the protection of such persons in both countries. This was when Bangladesh became a signatory of the UN Convention of Human Rights, and thus was bound to abide by its mandate. Bangladesh became a member of the UNHCR in 2002, and consequently, was bound to abide by its mandate as

well as to take into account the Guiding Principles relating to IDPs. In India, the *National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy*, whose draft was prepared in 1998 by the then Ministry of Rural Development, gained the status of official policy in 2007. It was the first state led effort towards providing assistance and protection to IDPs. The primary objectives of the National R&R Policy are to ensure minimum displacement, assist resettled individuals to achieve better standards of life than before their displacement, and finally, to enable displaced people to enjoy the benefits of development projects on the same scale as the other beneficiaries in cases where displacement is caused by the implementation of such projects. As a member of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR, also, India is bound by its mandate and thus required to pay regard to the well-being of IDPs in the country.

Assessing the Impact of Displacement on the Lives of Women

The Case of Bangladesh

Almost half of the IDP population in Khulna in Bangladesh consists of women, most of who have taken up residence in makeshift urban settlements. A considerable number of these women have also migrated to bigger cities, and especially to the capital city Dhaka, in search of employment in order to support themselves, their children, and other family members who depend on them.⁵⁷ An important reason for displaced women's migration to urban centres is the ostracism they face in their native villages. Many women IDPs are considered a burden by their extended families and in-laws in rural areas, and some of the most common livelihoods that involve working outdoors or working for others, outside the family, are socially stigmatised.⁵⁸

The lives of women displaced by river erosion are at serious risk due to the absence of support from communities and the state. Women are particularly marginalised because of restricted mobility and limited work opportunities. Very few women engage in paid jobs. Yet, the compulsion to work, among these women, is evident as they are responsible for the well-being of their children and senior members of their families. Displaced women are most often employed in the informal sector – for example, in shrimp industry, small business, and vegetable vending, where they work as daily labourers, domestic helpers, and hawkers.⁵⁹ Women, through their participation as economic contributors within their families, thus bring about changes in the macro structure of the labour market. Women are not only making an entry into the labour market, but their space within this labour market is also increasing and becoming more diversified. This is a positive development for women IDPs as it contributes to their inclusion and empowerment at a macro level.⁶⁰ By virtue of their participation, women usually manage to carve out a space in their host communities, which gives them the opportunity to influence the structure of their host communities in relation to their livelihoods. When women are able to access the facilities and resources of the host community, it increases their possibilities as a result. This process can be institutionalised in order to empower women to establish

livelihoods on their own, and to encourage the implementation of women friendly policies at the macro (state), community, and household levels.⁶¹

When it comes to urban utilities, hardly any women IDPs have access to electricity. Lack of proper access to water remains a major area of concern, especially for women IDPs. Drinking water is usually retrieved from municipal taps and from tube wells, many of which are contaminated due to a high concentration of arsenic. Many urban areas suffer from a shortage of municipal water supply due to GW depletion during the summer, as a result of which the living conditions of many IDPs are worsened. The areas where IDPs reside have very poor drainage systems, which often cause water logging during the monsoon season due to heavy rainfall. Unhygienic sanitation and water conditions in the resettlement areas often result in the spread of vector and waterborne diseases such as dengue and diarrhoea, which can severely affect the health of the women.⁶²

Most of the houses in urban resettlements have inadequate ventilation that often results in women and children suffering from respiratory tract infections. Some of the other dominant diseases among the women IDP population in Khulna include malnutrition, eclampsia, and UTI.⁶³ Many adolescent and adult women suffer from various health problems. Due to the lack of medical care facilities in resettlement areas, displaced women have little or no access to medical services. They are usually treated by unskilled medical practitioners from areas nearby with little skills or knowledge on treating illnesses.⁶⁴

Many displaced women also suffer from social insecurities due to losing ties of kinship as a result of migration. Some of the women who belong to the reproductive age become victims of trafficking and eve teasing. A lot of women are forced to engage in smuggling and sex trade due to their urgent need for food and lodging. Women IDPs are also susceptible to crime because of their baseline vulnerability.⁶⁵ With regard to financial assets, in the event of displacement one finds a reduction in the household income generating activities of women because of lack or absence of opportunities. As newcomers, many women IDPs fail to receive any financial assistance from their neighbours. Taking public loans, characterised by a high rate of interest, make the women IDPs economically vulnerable. Some women cannot receive any financial assistance because of their displaced status.⁶⁶ In cases like this, micro-finance schemes, if introduced, can provide alternative options for women, helping them to adapt to the existing situation.⁶⁷

Left organisations such as the Communist Party of Bangladesh and local non- governmental organisations like Prodipon, Sushilan, and Nijera Kori have mobilised displaced women and men to provide them with a voice in order to improve their situation.⁶⁸ Women members of Sushilan have often occupied lands owned by state authorities in order to build some basic infrastructure for women who are most needy in their communities. In some occasions, state authorities have had to comply with the demands of the displaced women as a consequence of their collective action and peer-to-peer solidarity. Landless women in areas affected by river erosion have also taken

part in protests and marches, often accompanied by their dependent children.⁶⁹

The Case of West Bengal

In Malda, women have been the first victims of displacement. Apart from adjusting to domestic hardships women are compelled to provide financial support for their families. Many displaced women are working in the bidi (tobacco) industry, or have become couriers in the smuggling nexus.⁷⁰ In the bidi industry women are often paid less than the official rates which are negotiated between the owners or contractors and the bidi workers' trade unions. During the sowing season, some women work in the fields, digging and carrying soil. In these cases, too, women are paid less than male labourers. The greatest problem faced by the women IDPs in the area is the lack of proper health services and sanitation facilities. Most women occupy land which belongs to others and they have no access to toilet facilities. Such facilities are non-existent even in the rehabilitation colonies in Malda, except for some wells and a few toilets that have been built with the help of non-governmental organisations. Access to clean and safe drinking water is a major problem, especially in districts that are arsenic prone. Women have to fetch water from a great distance, which requires a lot of work and often involves many difficulties. Local medical centres do not provide proper medicines or treatment for the displaced. Generally, it is the women and children who suffer from ailments related to malnutrition. Displaced women face numerous sexual risks as well, largely because of their compulsion to appease security guards and men who run smuggling rackets. In some rackets marriages have been arranged for girls of displaced families in distant places such as Bihar.⁷¹ The vulnerability of displaced women is also determined by the religious category to which they belong.⁷² Displaced women among the Muslim community, especially widows, receive help from financial practices such as Asul, Zakat, and Fetura. Through such charities, the displaced Muslim women are able to sustain themselves, and consequently, the tendency among them to migrate is decreasing.⁷³

In addition to significant changes in the socio-economic space and base of women at both the community and micro household level, changes can also be witnessed at the macro level. The displaced populations, especially women, are becoming more aware of policies and programs that are made available to them by non-state actors.⁷⁴ Some of the people displaced by river erosion in Malda have formed organisations to look into their welfare, a notable example being the Ganga Bhangan Pratirodh Nagarik Action Committee. The objective of this organisation is to alleviate the suffering of both human and animal victims of river erosion. It aims at leadership mobilisation and community capacity building in order to protest against exploitative policies and unsatisfactory conditions. The organisation has succeeded in bringing together people from various age groups and communities with diverse political affiliations⁷⁵. Women participate very actively in this organisation.⁷⁶

Women IDPs demonstrate a good deal of forwardness in voicing their demands and needs and in narrating their conditions. Self help groups for women exist in many parts of the areas that are affected by river erosion in the district of Malda in West Bengal. Women who organise such self help groups are usually engaged in efforts to enable other women IDPs to better cope with their situation.⁷⁷ The Self Help Group (SHG) programme in Malda was formed through the efforts of the Panchayat and Rural Development Department in 1999.⁷⁸ Today there are as many as nine thousand women's self help groups in Malda with an average of ten members per group. These self help groups for women make micro credit available to poor female members of households in the rural areas. The aim is to empower displaced women and enhance their capabilities, thereby reducing vulnerability in the poor rural households. Some of the women are provided training in finance management in order to be able to utilise this knowledge in income generating activities after taking loans from the SHG.⁷⁹

Support provided by the self help groups is not restricted to finance only. Familial and social support is also provided. The displaced women are highly interested in educating their children. Many of them are eager to educate their daughters, an opportunity which most of them have missed out on themselves. Although it is sometimes very challenging to study due to difficult circumstances, women IDPs in Malda have indicated their preference for their daughters to attend school.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement emphasise the protection of women but do not address issues such as women empowerment, or reflect on how women, as active agents, are reconstructing their lives on their own. Owing to such conventional perceptions, the unconventional roles played by women as well as the positive, productive developments which may occur in the context of displacement are not recognised and thus, they cannot be institutionalised through programs or policies.⁸¹

It is therefore recommended that state authorities in the districts of Malda and Khulna take on a gender sensitive approach towards rehabilitating the displaced in order to assist the empowerment of these already resilient, and resistant, women. Pro-poor and pro-women health services must be initiated, and when displaced women are relocated, they should be provided with certain basic amenities such as sanitation, energy, and water⁸². A significant number of public and private organisations as well as state policies that cater to the welfare and agency of displaced women are also needed for the displaced women to be able to voice their needs and demands in an articulate and consistent fashion. These women should finally receive the assistance they rightfully deserve.⁸³

Notes

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