

# **BANKIMCHANDRA ON SOCIETY, EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION**

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Every artist creates his own world through his art. Whether that world is the 'world' of materialists is debatable. But, no one seems to deny the deep significance of the world created by the artist. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1893) has similarly created a world through his artwork—a world through which his vision is revealed. His passion for literature and philosophical outlook expressed another dimension of his world. To explain the philosophical thought underlying various novels of Bankimchandra, Sudipta Kaviraj writes:

Bankim's central philosophical concern could be described in two ways. Stories of his novels often turn around a conflict between two inevitabilities, two things that are equally necessary truths of human life. A social world required definitions, a kind of basic social map which defined permissions and prohibitions. At the same time, there are the elemental drives of human nature which these social constructs are meant to discipline into reasonably safe forms, but hardly can. The social and moral worlds in which men actually live are made-up of these two dissimilar and contradictory elements—the desires which make men and the controls which make society. Much of Bankim's fictional movement arises from this central conflict—between the inevitability of moral orders and the inevitability of their transgression (Kaviraj 1995: 2).

So, it appears that Bankimchandra's thinking has some key themes, society, human nature, morality and dharma. Bankim's literary pursuits were motivated, directly, by the nation, the motherland and his own society, and indirectly by the search for ideals of humanity and human beings' destiny. The dharma which Bankimchandra upheld is man's true nature i.e., self-regard, that seeks to be fruitful through every endeavor of life—the dharma which preserves the harmony between knowledge, devotion, love, action and the

means of attaining full humanity. There are many questions on which Bankimchandra deeply thought and expressed his view through his literary works, such as, what is the meaning of human life? Is it possible to understand the idea of truth? What is the ideal of philanthropy? What is 'dharma'? What is 'society'? How far is society necessary for the development of individuals? Is it at all possible to compromise social life with the individual's freedom?

Bankimchandra was also concerned about the conflict between the development of the individual and the development of society. But Bankim made it clear that the real progress of the individual lies in the progress of society. Mohitlal Majumdar while explaining Bankim's society and individual thought has expressed a similar opinion, "From the very beginning he (Bankimchandra) strongly believed that the liberation of society is the true liberation of the individual"(Majumdar 1356: 29). But it is also true that despite giving priority to the development or emancipation of society, Bankim never underestimated the development or emancipation of the individual. He understood that while the proper development of the individual is inherent in the development of society, the overall development of society is possible only when the individual is developed.

The value of things like morality, dharma, etc. is determined in terms of the idea of society, the idea of individuals and their mutual relations. Because according to Bankimchandra, the main function of morality and dharma is to help the all-round development of individuals and give way to the improvement of society. Both the concept of morality and dharma are relative, as their conceptual existence depends on the existence of individuals and societies. Without society and individuals, the concept of morality and dharma is empty. Therefore, understanding the true characteristics of individuals and the nature of society is absolutely necessary. Bankimchandra's attempt was to describe the nature of individuals, society and their inter-relation through his novels and the doctrine of culture (praxis).

### **Social Thought of Bankimchandra**

For Bankimchandra, society refers to a particular place and period of culture or ethno-culture of people, and also refers to as the foundation for the self-development of people as well as the interrelated life of individuals and groups. In other words, society refers to a limited group of people of a nation or a country. If each such society recognizes the right of individual self-development and the rights of its own and others, then, the greater welfare of society as well as human life will be achieved. In *Dharmatattva*, one of his most accomplished work, Bankimchandra had given a detailed account on this subject under the titles Jagat-Priti (love for living creatures) and Swajati-Priti (love for family). According to Durkheim, society does not mean only a group of people living within a certain geographical boundary, but society refers to a collection of ideas, beliefs, emotions, etc. of different people. But in such a concept of society the individual is given more priority than the society. Society is declared to be the product of interpersonal relationships and consciousness. As a result, the importance has been given on the individual freedom and the primacy of the individual rather than the society as such. But Bankimchandra did not consider the primacy of individual over society. As, for him, the welfare of a society cannot be achieved merely by the sum of the development of different individuals. Rather, the overall welfare of the society leads to the welfare of mankind, and society should not be considered only as a collection of individuals. The existence of society is not only dependent on the conscience of different individuals but he believed that society exists beyond the thoughts and beliefs of individuals. Therefore, geographical location and historical evolution are very important factors in Bankimchandra's idea of society.

Bankimchandra envisioned an ideal society where the welfare of both the individual and society is the same; the individual has no independent interest or right. Therefore, there is no question of equality. Though Bankimchandra did not admit equal rights of everyone in all respect but he talked about everyone's legitimate rights i.e., right to be human, in other words, the right to attain the true humanity. Society is the foundation of humanity and all human being are equal, it means, for Bankimchandra, that all human beings have the capacity to attain that true humanity. It is to be noted here that, Bankimchandra's

social thought expressed in *Samya* (On Equality), "Biral" (The Cat) etc. clearly proves that his social thought is anti-capitalist. Bankimchandra's opposition to capitalism is clear from Marger's statement in the essay "The Cat", "We have some right to the flesh of the fish of this world". (Bagal, 1361: 618)

According to Bankimchandra society should be worshiped or respected as society possesses all the qualities possessed by every human being. Society is the teacher, protector and rule maker of the individual. He wrote in *Dharmatattva*, "Worship the society. Remember that society has all the qualities of human being. Society is our teacher, judge, nurturer and protector. Society is the king; society is the teacher" (Chattopadhyay 1888: 619). For Bankimchandra, motherland and society are the same thing. However, he did not believe in modern universal humanism or internationalism. He wanted to establish internationalism on the basis of nationalism. That is why Bankimchandra says that sometimes patriotism is the greatest religion. In this case, Mohitlal Majumder's statement is worthy to be mentioned:

I have said earlier that Bankimchandra did not believe in the idea that has emerged in the modern times called *Vishwamanava* (universal human being). He agrees to understand 'nation' in the sense of society, and wants to build internationalism on top of nationalism. ...however universal the humanity of man may be in any sense—geographical nature, historical development, and differences of blood, in the combination of these three, differences from society to society are inevitable; the progress of creation towards the particular, not towards the universal (Majumdar 1356: 42).

But the important point is that Bankimchandra's love for the nation is not the same as modern nationalism. Not the same because there is no room for xenophobia in his idea of patriotism. On the contrary, according to him, in many cases the true dharma is to ensure the wellbeing of others (*parahit*) than the self-wellbeing (*ātmahit*). The main reason behind Bankimchandra's passion for this Swadesh Priti or love for the nation is to establish dharma in the society and to attain humanity. He believed that for self-identity the rescue of history, and for self-esteem the glorification of one's own culture,

are indispensable. Just as, it is impossible for a person without self-respect to attain true humanity, it is also impossible to instill morality in a society without a sense of national pride (Ibid, 42).

One may ask why it is necessary to protect the motherland. According to Bankimchandra, protection of the motherland, love for family, etc. are God-oriented actions. The reason is that through this, the benefit of the world is possible. If different societies waste time in attacking each other, then, dharma and progress or development will disappear from the society. So, everyone should protect the motherland for the benefit of all. Purification of the mind will not be possible if one cannot sacrifice her/his self for the sake of other human being. In his own words, "Apart from devotion towards God, patriotism is the great dharma" (Chattopadhyay 1888: 619). Bankimchandra's patriotism is an essential part of his doctrine of culture (*anushilanadharm*). It may be apprehended that Bankimchandra may be promoting xenophobia in the name of patriotism or *swadeshpriti*. But there is no place of xenophobia in Bankimchandra's idea of *swadeshpriti*. It only means the love for motherland (*swadesh*). He also said that *swadeshpriti* leads to *jagat-priti* and *Bhagavat-priti*. According to Bankimchandra, the foundational basis of society is not politics or economy, it is humanity. Explaining the importance of Bankimchandra's patriotism, Mohitlal Majumdar said, "...stake everything in pursuit of patriotism; Place that love below the love of God, worship that country as a god like your *Ishtadevata*; In that, both divine and earthly salvation will be gained." (Majumdar 1356: 200)

Hobbes and Rousseau among sociologists discussed the origin, structure of society and the nature of the interrelationship between society and individual. Bankimchandra did not discuss the origin of society. Rather, he has made a discussion about the structure of society and what should be the relationship of individuals with society. If we look at the Hindu society, it will be seen that the Hindu social system has some basic features. Bankimchandra's social thought is mainly centered on Hindu society. The Hindu social system is built on the concept of equality, theory of action, reincarnation, the concept of moksha as the ultimate goal of life, tolerance as a virtue of the individual, non-violence,

God and the concept of oneness of the embodied soul with the un-embodied soul. The concept of equality is problematic in Hinduism. Although Hinduism and Hindu society recognize the right of all individuals to attain salvation, the *varṇāśrama* system is not compatible with the principle of equality. The hierarchy in Hindu society is based on this *varṇāśrama* system. There are different explanations found in Indian philosophy regarding the origin of the caste system. In the *Gīta* as well as in the *Mahabharata*, the division of *varṇa* is based on action/profession (*karma*) and Quality/Character (*guṇa*). That is, in terms of *karmas* and *guṇas*, some are *Brahmins*, some are *Kshatriyas*, some are *Vaishyas*, and some are *Śūdras*. Bankimchandra also explains the caste system in this way and he thinks that ignorance about this caste system is one of the main reasons for the decline of India. In his words,

...Why should I worship the one who does not have the quality for which I should worship? Showing devotion (bhakti) to such person is amount to doing unrighteous act (adharmā). Not to understand this is a serious reason for India's decline. Brahmin was the object of devotion as they possessed some specific qualities, when those qualities are no longer present in them, then why did I start worshipping Brahmin? (Chattopadhyay 1888: 618)

According to Bankimchandra, *Varṇāśramadharmā* and casteism are completely separate issues. He argued that *varṇāśramadharmā* is based on social division. Caste discrimination may be inauspicious in its abuse, but *varṇāśramadharmā* arose out of social necessity and is good for society. Brahmins are at the apex of *varṇāśramadharmā*. If the Brahmin is a true follower of this *varṇāśramadharmā*, the Hindu society can be of great benefit. It was like that in ancient Hindu society. At that time, Brahmin was really social teacher, guru of society, deity and also objects of devotion. Then, social welfare was achieved through the devotion towards Brahmin. But the question is, should we have devotion towards a Brahmin who is celibate, selfish, and low-spirited? According to him, "Whoever has the qualities of a Brahmin, that is, one who is religious, learned, and chaste, a teacher of the people, I will worship him; I will not worship him, who is

not that. Instead, the *Śudras* who have the qualities of a Brahmin, i.e. one who is religious, learned, chaste, a teacher of the people, I will worship him". (Ibid, 618)

Such an interpretation of the caste system is acceptable for Bankimchandra, because the basis of practice and Bankimchandra's religious thought is devotion (*bhakti*). But Bankimchandra did not speak only of devotion towards God. He was of the opinion that who is virtuous is an object of devotion. And since, according to him, society contains all the qualities that every human being possesses, society is also an object of devotion.

### **Bankimchandra on Equality**

The extreme excellence of Bankimchandra's thinking power is revealed by his erudite thinking on various subjects. He discussed a very important topic of sociology, political science, and philosophy in the article called *Sāmya* (On Equality, published in 1879). The word 'Sāmya' is used in the Bengali as equivalent of the English word 'equality'. Equality basically means 'equal rights for all people'. It remains open that what are the issues about which the question of 'equal rights' can be raised. However, in order to understand what 'equality' is, the first thing we need to discuss is what exactly we mean by 'discrimination/inequality' and what kind of discrimination is the cause of individuals' social status and misery in life.

In this essay, Bankimchandra first mentioned two types of inequality—natural inequality and unnatural inequality. Among these, unnatural inequality is the root cause of human suffering. Discrimination or inequality among human beings is a hindrance to the all-round development of the individual and the progress and excellence of society and civilization. By 'natural inequality', Bankimchandra refers to those inequalities which are not caused by society or social artificial criteria. That is, the difference between people in terms of physical ability, intelligence, etc. belongs to this category. Inequality among people due to natural discrimination does not have a special negative effect on the social status, values, and interpersonal relationships of people. According to Bankimchandra, the root cause of inequality noticed in social status, value, interpersonal relations is unnatural inequality – the source of which is social artificial criteria.

In the first section of the essay, Bankimchandra mentioned various sources of unnatural inequality. Political power, acquired wealth or money, caste-system etc. are causes of unnatural discrimination. Bankimchandra believed that the social status of a person depends on all these factors. For him, by using all these factors, one person or group is proved inferior to another person or group and which exploits and oppresses them. As a result, a group of people maintain their power and live a luxurious life, while another group of people become poorer and poorer and become only a means of luxury for the first-class people. In this regard, we find similarities between Bankimchandra's thought and Marx's thought. According to Marxism, society is governed by class conflict. The bourgeoisie always oppresses and exploits the proletariat.

Bankimchandra cited Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Rousseau as pioneers of theory of equality. Buddha opposed the caste system of Brahmanism, and sought to uplift the *Śūdras*. Jesus Christ tried to relieve the suffering and leash of the slaves. Like Voltaire, Bankimchandra disliked Rousseau's economic egalitarianism, but he believed that Rousseau's thought had gained momentum after the French Revolution. He called Rousseau the father of equality and socialism. Bankimchandra's thought about equality changed later on and he did not republish the essay. However, in order to resolve the misconceptions about equality, he wrote,

We do not interpret equality to mean that all men must be equal. It can never happen. Where there are natural differences in intelligence, mental strength, education, physical strength, etc., there will of course be difference in condition - no one can save. However, equality of rights is necessary - if someone has capacity, he should not deviate himself from attaining liberation by considering that he does not have rights to liberation. Everyone wants to be free. (Chattopadhyay, 1879: 406)

### **Bankimchandra on Women's Education and Social Reform**

During the renaissance of Bengal, a new horizon gradually opened up in the social system. Certain variability can be observed in the thought process of English educated people. They began to feel that life cannot be made meaningful only through the preservation of traditional values. This requires a deep analysis of traditional values and



norms and reforming them if necessary. We know that Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), a rationalist, was the pioneer of social reform movement in Bengal's social system. He tried to find solutions to various problems of the society in various ways. In order to do that, he established Brahma Samaj and started spreading education across the society. A major example of his efforts is the abolition of *sati*-immolation. Along with Rammohan's social reform movement, other social reform movements took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) is one of the pioneers of this progressive movement. He was mainly concerned with two particular issues of society – widow remarriage and polygamy. The primary basis of Vidyasagar's movement was compassion for the plight of women. But later he realized that if he was to succeed in solving the problem, he would have to fight against the anti-reform sentiments of conservative Hindus. As a result of Vidyasagar's social reform movement, the Widow Remarriage Act came into force in 1856.

When Bankimchandra came to Kolkata for his education, various social reform movements were taking place in the society of Bengal. In the two novels *Bishabriksha* (1873) and *Krishnakanter Will* (1878) published in *Bangadarsan* (1872-1901), a Bengali periodical edited by Bankimchandra himself, the imprint of the discussion on widow remarriage and polygamy can be seen. From this, we can understand how much Bankimchandra was influenced by the two social reform movements of the society. His sympathetic attitude towards the distressed women is seen in these two novels. In *Bishabriksha*, we find that Nagendranath married the widow Kundanandini. From this, one might think that Bankimchandra was in favor of widow remarriage. But eventually it is seen that this marriage brings misery in Nagendranath's life. Thus, one may conclude that he was indeed against widow remarriage. Not only this, one may also think that Bankimchandra was very bigoted and opposed everything that he believed to be a cause of disunity in society.

Bankimchandra, who was influenced by the utilitarianism of Mill (1806-1873) and the positivist humanism of Comte (1798-1857), was certainly not against widow remarriage. But he had objections to Vidyasagar's ideas and methods of widow remarriage

movement. Because, he realized that just as social life cannot be governed by scriptures alone, similarly, social life cannot be governed by laws alone, as, there are many lacunas both in scriptures and in laws. In fact, Bankimchandra's decision about the said social reform movements is based not on emotion, but on intellect. This aspect of Bankimchandra can be understood through the essay 'Sāmya'. Bankimchandra wrote,

Whether widow remarriage is good or bad is a separate matter. This is not the place of its consideration. But I can say that if someone asks us, whether women's education is good or bad? Whether all women should be educated or not, we will immediately answer, women's education is very good; all women should be educated; but if someone asks us such a question about widow marriage, we will not give such an answer. We will say, widow remarriage is neither good nor bad; it may not be good for all widows to marry, but it is good for widows to have the right to marry according to their will. ...But if a widow, whether a Hindu, or whatever, wishes to remarry after the demise of her husband, she is certainly entitled to it. (Chattopadhyay, 1873: 401)

Bankimchandra talked about the rights of the individual. According to him, every person has equal rights. If a man can marry after the death of his wife, so can a wife after the death of her husband. It goes without saying that such decisions are based on unbiased rationality. And, for that reason, he had a different opinion about the prevalence of widow remarriage in modern society. In this context he further wrote,

Therefore, the widow is entitled to marriage. But this moral theory is still not widely accepted in this country. Those who accept it as a result of English education, or at the request of Vidyasagar Mahasaya or Brahma Dharma, do not put it into practice. Those who accept widow marriage as the rightful one, even if do not dare to entertain the willingness of remarriage of their own widows. The reason is the fear of the society. ...But why this principle cannot instil into this society, ...the reason is probably the inviolability of morals in the society. (Ibid, 402)

We can see his dispassionate and clear view of the problem in *Bishabriksha*. When Suryamukhi came to know that Nagendranath was having a relationship with the widow Kundanandini, Suryamukhi was emotionally distressed and wrote a letter to Nanda, "... there is a great scholar in Calcutta named Vidyasagar, he has written a book on widow

remarriage. If he is a scholar who arranges a widow's marriage, then, who is a fool?" (Chattopadhyay 1360: 279) Apparently, it may seem that Bankimchandra attacked Vidyasagar with this statement. Some researchers are of the opinion that this statement is not the author's own. Suryamukhi said this because of her fear of being deprived of her husband's love, and the mental depression that has arisen due to it. This statement is strictly used to maintain the spontaneity of the story of the novel (Majumdar 2000: 68).

We have already seen that in 19th century there was a movement against polygamy along with the widow-remarriage movement. This problematic aspect of the Hindu society is also observed in Bankimchandra's novels *Bishabriksha* and *DeviChowdhurani* (1884). In the novel *DeviChowdhurani*, we see that Brajeshwar marries thrice. When Brajeshwar's father Haravallava refused to accept Prafulla, the heroine of the novel, as his daughter-in-law, Brajeshwar married to Nayan and Sagar. But it is noteworthy that Brajeshwar and his family did not face any family problems as a result of this polygamy. On the other hand, it can be seen in *Bishabriksha* that when Nagendranath married the widow Kundanandini, Suryamukhi and Nagendranath's marital life was in conflict. From this it appears that Bankimchandra has an implicit moral objection to polygamy. At least he has expressed such an opinion in the essay 'Sāmya'. But like the widow remarriage movement, Bankimchandra criticized Vidyasagar in this case, too. His criticism is procedural. His stake in this matter was very clear; he felt that social customs like polygamy could not be abolished by law. He believed that this social custom would soon disappear due to the impact of modern society. That will happen for two reasons, first, through the expansion of mass education and secondly, to prevent population growth due to economic distress. Bankimchandra's socio-materialist approach to the problem at hand reflects his modern outlook (Ibid, 69).

Bankimchandra did not directly participate in the social reform movement. He strongly disagreed with Derozio's (1809-1831) radical social thought and the view of the Young Bengal group. In fact, the conservative Hindus of the time wanted to uphold traditional values within the social order and their attitude towards women was that the purpose of the women's life was only to bring about the well-being of domestic life. For this reason,

public opinion did not develop against widow remarriage at that time. But special awareness and effort among the Bengalis at the higher level of society towards women's education can also be noticed at this time. A sense of 'individuality' gradually emerged among the English-educated Bengalis in the case of women. In this regard, we may recall Rammohan and Vidyasagar's policy of woman's education. Rajnarayan Basu wrote in his book *Sekalo Ekal* about this, "Look at the social reforms, women are being educated, they are getting married at an older age, people are getting divorced, widows are getting remarried, freedom is being given to women in terms of emigration" (Basu 1796: 30).

Bankimchandra wrote his novels in the backdrop of this societal 'change'. So, it is natural that these societal 'changes' had an impact on his thinking and creative outlook. For him, women's education is essential for the development of sense of freedom and individuality in women. Here we can refer to Taracharan's statement in the novel *Bishabriksha*, "You should give up the worship of bricks and mortars, rather arrange [re]marriages of [widow] aunties, give education to women, why do you keep them in cages? Get the women out" (Chattopadhyay 1873: 268). Here too, the indirect relationship of women's education with the emancipation of women from domestic bonds is acknowledged.

But Bankimchandra's positive and strong attitude towards the inextricable link between women's education and awareness of women's individuality and relationships is revealed in his novels *Anandamath* (1882), *Devi Chowdhurani* and *Sitaram* (1887). Through these novels, he had tried hard to highlight the issue of ideal femininity. As a result of such hard determination, we see characters like Shanti (*Anandamath*), Prafulla (*Devi Chowdhurani*) and Shree (*Sitaram*). Bankimchandra's concept of the ideal woman is embodied through the amazing bravery, fearlessness and confidence of Shanti's character. On the other hand, Prafulla's character is also a symbol of idealistic heroism and personality. Prafulla's character is based on Bankimchandra's concept of praxis. Through the character of Shree, he expressed the relationship between education and strong mental capacity of the women. In addition, his ideology about the freedom of women has been revealed through various female characters in other novels. But these three female characters mentioned above are particularly important. According to

Bankimchandra, the awareness of women's freedom will come from women's education. He wanted to highlight this feeling through various characters. About the need for women's education, he wrote in his essay 'Sāmya',

If people are well-educated—especially if women are well-educated, they can easily overcome the system of domestic secrecy. If there is education, women's ability to earn money will grow, and if these native women and men are well educated in all sciences, foreign trade, then, foreign industry or foreign merchants cannot steal their food. Education is the way to prevent all kinds of social evils (Chattopadhyay 1361: 405-406).

There was a conflict in Bankimchandra's mind between intellectualism, individual freedom and on the other hand the tradition and ancient values of Hindu scriptures. So, we see that although the main qualities of these characters are expressive of women's freedom and the individuality of the women, but as a matter of fact the attraction to family life and devotion to husbands dims the uniqueness of these women characters. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Bankimchandra was particularly concerned about the freedom and rights of women. Bankim's thoughts on women's rights and freedom are revealed in the words of Govindalal's wife Bhramar in the novel *Krishnakanter Will*. Bhramar writes in a letter to her husband that,

You know, my devotion to you is unwavering - my faith in you is eternal. I knew that too. But now I understand that it is not. As long as you are worthy of devotion, so long as I am devoted; As long as you are believable, I believe you. Now I have no devotion or faith in you. I do not feel happiness to see you (Chattopadhyay 1360: 572).

It may be noted that Bankimchandra could not separate the 'value of women in domestic life' from the concept of women's freedom and rights in the development of the women due to the narrow attitude and plight of the society at that time. At the end of almost all the novels, we see that the importance of women's domestic value prevails. However, it is undeniable that Bankim had a kind of progressive idea in the development of women. We can quote the following from the article 'Prachina and Navina',

...As society prospers in the advancement of men, similarly in the advancement of women; As women are half of society. An association of equal shares of men and women is called society; The progress of society depends on the equal progress of both. It is unethical to say that the improvement of one part is the main purpose of social reform, and the improvement of the other part is the secondary purpose (Chattopadhyay 1361: 250).

At the end, we may say that Bankimchandra's concept of social reform is an integrative concept. He never considered the problems of widow remarriage, polygamy, etc., which are against the progress of women, separately. Instead of their isolated solution, he thought that it will be much more effective to address all these issues through the overall development and reformation of society. As much as Bankimchandra's negative thoughts about these problematic issues are concerned, if we review them together with the overall idea of Bankimchandra's social thought, it will be seen that there is no conflict in Bankimchandra's social reform thoughts. Bankimchandra's idea regarding casteism is an echo of the view uphold by traditional and radical Hindus. Though he tried to prove that *varṇāśramadharama* can bring prosperity in the society but he failed to prove that how this *varṇa* system is compatible with the modern society and conducive to advancement of society as well as individual. To conclude, we can say that, Bankimchandra tried to develop a holistic system on the basis of rationality but could not fully succeeded due to conflict between rationality and tradition.

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