

African Descendants: Socio-Cultural Profile of Siddi Tribe in India

Akhilesh Kumar Upadhyay*

Abstract:

The racially descriptive term Siddi/Habshi refers to a people of African descent (Lobo 1984). However, within the broad labels of Habshi/Siddi and personal names that were given to African Indians, over the centuries they have created their own diverse and changing identities. Siddi is believed to be a corruption of "Sayyed" and Habshi is from the Arabic term for an Abyssinian, or one who emigrated from Ethiopia. Such labels are embedded in Indian local, state, and national constructs as found in their records to socially assign African Indians specified locations in such a way as to regard all of them as foreigners of African origin, whose forebears were mostly enslaved. African Indian racial identity as Siddi/Habshis is in some contexts a social stigma in India.

There are different views regarding the social history of Siddis. There is no unanimity of opinion among historians regarding the origin of Siddis. Scholars who have undertaken the researchwork on Siddis are still divided over the issues of origin of Siddis. However, a large number of scholars of the view that Siddi migrated to India. The socio political and cultural profile of Siddi community is completely different from the normal immigrant communities of India. The status and standards of the living conditions of this community away from the main stream society is giving the mark of special identity and status. The social identity and social status are worthwhile in defining the social markers of this community. The following sections deal with different aspects of the community examining or social, political, economic and cultural frames and profiles.

Size and Distribution Siddi Tribe in India:

The Siddi community is also known by different names such as Habshi and Badsha. It is commonly believed that they are of African origin. There are some disagreements among scholars regarding actual time of their arrival to India. According to Census 1931, the Siddi appear to have been brought to India by the Portuguese towards the end of 17th century, presumably as slaves. While Russel and HiraLal (1916) contend that they had been brought to India in the middle of 15th century. The history of their migration is recalled in oral tradition as well as from the historical accounts.¹ At present the Siddi are largely concentrated in the western coast of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka states. However some Siddi have also settled in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh and Daman Diu. Their main concentration is in Gujarat district of Gujarat division. They have been put under Scheduled Tribe category. As per 1981 census, the population of Siddi tribe was estimated to be 54291. But Siddi who are designated as scheduled tribe were 8662 out of which 4417 were male and 4245 female according to census 2001.

In India, Karnataka has the largest concentration of Siddi. According to latest estimates there are around 3,700 Siddi families in the state with a total population of 18,000. Other Siddi populations in the sub-continent include around 10,000 in Gujarat and 12,000 in Hyderabad. A few hundreds are also in Lucknow, Delhi and Calcutta. Fewer than 1,000 "Ceylon Kapris" live in Sri Lanka.²

Most Siddi estimated to number between 20,000 and 30,000 in a nation of over a billion people live in the western Indian State of Gujarat. Smaller populations are found in neighbouring Maharashtra and two southern states, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

* **Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for Studies of Diaspora, Central University of Gujarat**

¹Russel R.V, Hiralal, (1916), *The Tribe and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Vol. IV, London, Macmillan and Co. Limited St. Martin's Street, pp. 409.

² Anil BudurLulla, (2010) A Bottle of Honey for Our Brother, *Open Magazine*, New Delhi, *Press Short Takes Section*, 30 October 2010), pp. 1-20

Gujarat:

The Siddi speak Gujarati language within their kin circle as well as with the outsiders. Gujarati script is used. The people living in urban areas can speak a mixture of Hindi and Urdu also. Some educated Siddi speak English. The dress of the Siddi is a combination of traditional Hindu and Muslim dress. The males wear patloon (trousers), khamij (shirt) and safo (turban). But now-a-days, they mostly use pant and shirt. The females use saree or a ghagro (broad petticoat) and choli (blouse). Girls of the young generation now wear broad pajama and frock. Silver and glass bangles are also used by the women. The Siddi clearly show the Negroid racial strain, in their physical features (Anil BudurLulla, 2010, pp. 409-10. Ibid.)

Karnataka:

The Siddi of Karnataka is ethnic group inhabiting India. Members are considered to have been descended from Bantu peoples from Southeast Africa that were brought to the Indian subcontinent as slaves by Portuguese merchants. There is a 50,000 strong Siddi population across India, of which more than one-third lives in Karnataka. In Karnataka, they are concentrated in Yellapur, Haliyal, Ankola, Joida, Mundgod and Sirsitaluks of Uttara Kannada and in Khanapur of Belgaum and Kalghatgi of Dharwad district. Many members of Siddi community have migrated to Pakistan after independence has settled in Karachi, Sindh.

During the Goan Inquisition, some of these slaves were freed and some escaped into the forests of the neighbouring Karnataka state. As the bulk of the Inquisition's records are now destroyed, a thorough reconstruction of the Siddi' history in India and in Karnataka is very difficult. However, the few records that exist present a figure of oppression and ill treatment that the slaves were subjected to. A few of them, however, are also said to have escaped slavery. While most of them were victims of slave trade, some of them also were imported by the Nawabs in the 15th -16th centuries as military mercenaries. Others were sailors on the trade routes to the east.³

Origin of African Siddi in the present scenario very important thinks. This time, try to know that different different type of Indian and sub content Siddi. For instance, in 2013, the New York Public Library held an artistic exhibition entitled Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals and Rulers, which retraced the lives and accomplishments of prominent Siddi form the past. Lasting until July, it included 100 reproductions of paintings and modern photographs.⁴

Hyderabad:

Hyderabad was part of the then Bahamani kingdom. The unflinching loyalty and selflessness of the Siddi soldiers toward their rulers made them noble and thus enabled them to wield power in the Islamic world. Khalidi argues that since the Siddi (Africans) came from different backgrounds and were enlisted in the Nizam's "African Guards" in Hyderabad, the only element that bound them together was Islam. Thus, their connection with the larger Islamic community was important for the Siddi.⁵ When the Siddi served a lifetime employment in the state army, Siddi were perceived as based on their Africanness.⁶ However as a privileged class Siddi had the security of jobs in the army, and the fact that they did not intend to return to Africa made them the object of envy in Hyderabad. Thus in 1950 the Africans cavalry guards were disbanded and received no sympathy forcing them to migrate to the Western Ghats, into

³Kamth U S. (1985) *Gazetteer of India, Karnataka State, Uttar Kannada District*, Bangalore, Government, of Bangalore, pp. 152.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Omar, Khalidi, (1989), "African Diaspora in India: The Caste of the Habshis of the Dakan," *Islamic Culture*, (1-2), 53, New Delhi, Hamdard National Foundation. pp. 85-107.

⁶Pashington, Obeng, (August, 2008) *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia* Lexington Books , pp. 18.

the forest (Omar, Khalidi, 1989, pp. 85-107). Thus we see the downfall of Siddi in the state of Hyderabad (Omar, Khalidi, 1989:85-107.)

In the 18th century, a Siddi community was established in Hyderabad State by the Arab Siddi diaspora, who would frequently serve as cavalry guards of the AsifJahiNizam's irregular army. The AsifJahiNizams patronised them with rewards and the traditional Marfa music gained popularity and would be performed during official celebrations and ceremonies. The Siddi of Hyderabad have traditionally resided in the A.C. Guards (African Cavalry Guards) area near Masjid Rahmania, known locally as SiddiRisala.

Presently the population of Siddi in Hyderabad has been estimated at around 15,000. Siddi in Hyderabad are engaged in various types of jobs. Siddi living in proximity of coastal area earn their livelihood by dealing in fish business. Educated Siddi are working as government officials and skilled professionals. Siddi of Hyderabad speakTelagu as their first language. They also speak Hindi and English.

Maharashtra:

There is a legend of how the Siddi captured Janjira, Janjira, also called Habsan that is Habshi's or African's land, lies between 17° 59' and 18° 32' north latitude and 72° 57' and 73° 21' east longitude, which reads much like the story of how the Greeks entered Troy. Around 1489 AD an Abyssinian disguised as a merchant, obtained permission from the chiefs of the Island to send 300 boxes, supposed to contain valuable wares. But in reality every one of these boxes contained a soldier and "by this indigenous trick the Abyssinians possessed themselves of Janjira and the fort."⁷

Ibn Battuta writes in his journey from Cambay to Sandabur that the Abyssinians were the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean. Abyssinian prowess on the sea facilitated the appointment of Siddi captains as admirals of the Mughal fleet.⁸ Even Abbe Carre, a French traveller who visited India in 1672, observed that Shivaj's troops had to retreat in disorder from an expedition in which they had been worsted by the army of the Cydy (Siddi). That he was a moor, and a little above Dabul, who guarded the interest of the Mughal Emperor and gave Shivaji much trouble by the incursions he made on his territory. The same day all the inhabitants at the coast had fled to the mountains with their families and cattle, as everyone along this river was in terror of the Siddi, who had come up to it within three leagues off, with many armed boats, filled with soldiers. They had sacked the villages and burnt two little ships and other craft, which Shivaji was building on this river. The next day he found another town being abandoned named Kaire in the Ratnagiri district due to Siddi.⁹

Towards the end of the fifteenth century Sidi Yakut is mentioned as admiral of Bahadur Gelani, the son of the Bahamani governor of Goa, who established himself at Goa and Dabhol, attempted in the decline of Bahamani power, to make himself ruler of the Konkan. In 1493 Bahdur sent Yakut with a fleet of twenty sail against the Gujarat fort of Mahim near Bombay. Yakut took the fort and Bahadur was attacked, defeated and slain by Muhammad Bahmani. There is no evidence that this Yakut Khan was connected with Janjira. According to a Musalman History of Ahmadnagar, it was Malik Ahmad (1490-1508) the founder of Ahmadnagar dynasty who first established Abyssinians as the captains of the island of Janjira (Bombay Gazetteer, of India, 1883: 434).

Siddi, as the rulers of an Island served a lot to the Mughals as sea reliable coast guards. This history uncovers the glory of Siddi who given a chance could rule with much efficiency

⁷Banaji, D R. (1932), *Bombay and the Siddis*, Bombay, University of Bombay, Bombay, pp. 20

⁸ Ibid. pp. 20

⁹Fawcett C. Sir, Richard, B. Sir. (1990) 'The Travels of Abbe Carre in India and the Near East, 1672-1674' *Hakluyt Society Foundation*, vol.1, London, Hakluyt Society, England, pp. 195 -197.

and bravery. The researcher found that while on the one hand Siddi ruled great islands and had links with great Mughals, yet on the other they were in chains, slogging under scorching sun, labouring under great burdens, carrying people for a bowl of rice and serving their masters with utter loyalty and submission in Goa and further down India's Western Coast.¹⁰

Bengal:

Siddi have played a greater role in the history of Bengal than elsewhere in India. Almost from the day of its conquest by the Muslim rulers Bengal formed a separate kingdom, and its acknowledgement of the Delhi Sovereignty was rarely more than normal. Muhammad Khaliji, an officer of Muizz-ud-din Ghori, was the first to rule (1198 /99), followed by many until Fakhr-ud-din, Mubarak Shah (1338) claimed to be king with the title of Ali Shahin. In 1446 a local Hindu raja called Kans, succeeded by his son and grandson, taking its place. The son of Kans became a Mohammedan. This line of Rajas ended the raja was murdered by an Abyssinian (Habshi, Siddi) eunuch who ascended the throne for eight months, being followed by another Abyssinian, also a slave, for three years, when he was assassinated, his Successor, also an Abyssinian, made himself detested, and finally was murdered after a reign of three years and five months (The Imperial Gazetteer, of India, 1909:371-373).

Social Aspects of Siddi:

Gradual integration with the Indian society Siddi have not only adopted the total Hindu culture of the region but have also attuned themselves as per the beliefs of various religions. They are trying to maintain a place for themselves in Indian culture and at the same time are in search of a slot in each religion – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.¹¹ It is good to notice that in their own religious communities- be it Christianity that claims equal standing to all, Islam or Hinduism – they are a displaced tribe not par equal to other locals who practice the same religion as them. Earlier they could not have marital relations with the identical religious locals due to their Negroid features that degraded them despite being strong built, highly loyal and hardworking.¹² The Hindu Siddi is blame on the local caste hierarchy. They consider themselves superior to and above the Bandhis and Namadari on the ladder of castes but below the Havig Brahmins and Okkals.¹³ They have come to consider themselves as one caste group and refer themselves as a caste group by using the Konkani term for caste, (Jat). But now they prefer to consider themselves as a community (Someday) when trying to emphasize the unity of the Siddi irrespective of religious distinctions between them.¹⁴ One of the reasons for the Siddi to be at the lowest strata of the society is their poverty which has engulfed them due to illiteracy, which is duly misused by the rich landlords for selfish motives. But both Muslim and Christian Siddi have a separate status within their respective religions.

Language:

Siddi mainly speak the Kannada language, which belongs to the Dravidian family. Some also speak other languages, such as Konkani and Marathi and English. They people are speaking Kannada, Marathi, English and Gujarati as well as local people. Any people cannot different in base of language.

¹⁰ Frederick Noronaha, (1997) 'Siddi Striving to Improve Status,' *Gomantak Times, Uttara Kannada*, (31st May 1997)

¹¹ Chauhan R. R. S. (1995), *Africans in India from Slavery to Royalty*, New Delhi, Asian Publication Services, pp. 241.

¹² Prasad, K. K. (2005), *In search of an Identity : An ethnographic Study of the Siddis in Karnataka*, Bangalore, Jana JagratiPrakashana, pp. 42-45

¹³ Chauhan, R. R. S. (1995), *Africans in India from Slavery to Royalty*, New Delhi ,Asian Publication Services, , pp. 241

¹⁴ Prasad, K. K. & Agent, P. et al. (2008), *The African Diaspora in Asia: Explorations on a Less Known Fact*, Bangalore, Jana JagritiPrakashana , pp. 218.

Religion:

The Siddi belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. As they have embraced Islam, they do not have any family deity or village deities. During the time of crisis they visit dargha (tomb of pir) and offer chadar¹⁵. In Jambur village, Gujarat, there are a number of darghas of different pirs of which four are very important for them, namely Nagarshipirdargha, BabaghorKidargha, Dasalbapukidargha and Mai-Parsa Ki dargha at Jamlur village of Gujarat district. Each and every sakh of the Siddi are affiliated to one or the other pir. They observe Eid, Ramjan and Moharram. Some of the Siddi offer Namaj every day. They also believe in supernatural powers: They have Bhua (a spirit possessed man) who has the power to cure various ailments of the people.

Among Siddi families in Karnataka, there are Roman Catholics, Hindus and Muslims. The Haliyaltaluk has populations of Muslims and Christians while the Hindu populations are concentrated in the ghat areas of yellapur and Ankola. Although Siddi opt for different religions they inter marry across religions without any reservations.

Hiriyaru worship:

The one factor which keeps the Siddi united irrespective of their religion is the Hiriyaru or ancestor worship. The dead are believed to be nearby, in the form of spirits. They are regarded as divine authority to be consulted by a family in all its concerns. On occasions like births, marriages and deaths, the ancestors are invoked. The home is organised around Hiriyaru, the spirits of departed parents, signifies a remembrance of the parents; it is a way of thanking them for their care over several years and also entreating them to keep a vigil over the family in future. It is obligatory for all relatives to attend the function, thus renewing kinship relations.

Hiriyaru worship may be performed twice a year by the 'Karthā' (head) of the family. It normally is held during the Navarathri festival in the first week of November. If this is not possible for some reason, it may also be performed in April–May during the other major festival - Holi. These obviously are not meant to coincide with the dates of the parents' deaths as the Siddi only observe the first death anniversary. Hindu Siddi usually have elaborate functions to mark the event, but not so the Christian and Muslim Siddi.¹⁶

Caste System:

Siddi are considered by locals to be belonging to separate caste lower than Mahars. The Hindu Siddi lay claim on the local caste hierarchy.¹⁷ They assume themselves superior to and above the Bandhi and Namdadri on the ranking of caste but below the Having Brahmins and Okkals. While they dine in having Brahmin's house, the food for Siddi is cooked and served outside the house. The Okkaligas also treat them in similar manner. The Bandhis and the Namadaris are prepared to host the Siddi indoors the Siddi feel themselves higher in the caste hierarchy and spurn dining with them.¹⁸ Same situation follows with local Christian and the Muslims. The Local Christians assume themselves distinct and higher than the Siddi Christians due to which inter-marriage between Siddi and local Christians is not in practice.

Kinship:

Kinship outlines a significant component in the whole kinship system as it serves as an indicator of accepting of the kinship relation and patterns of behaviour among various kin groups, whereas the family is a social and economic group consisting of one or more parents and their children. Murdock defines the family as a social group characterized by common

¹⁵ A cloth which is given to Maulvi who spread the cloth on the tomb

¹⁶ *Gazetteer of India, Uttar Kannada*, (1985), pp. 158.

¹⁷ Prasad, K. K. (2005), In Search of An Identity: *An Ethnographic Study of the Siddis in Karnataka*, Bangalore, Jana JagratiPrakashana, pp. 35.

¹⁸ Palakshappa, T .C. (1976), *The Siddhis of North Kanara*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private, Limited, pp. 14.

residence economic cooperation and reproduction.¹⁹ Siddi families are either joint family, extended or small families. Earlier Siddi used to live in joint families but now the most of Siddi follow either extended or micro family system. Kinship refers to the social recognition and expression of genealogical relationships, both consanguineal and affinal.²⁰

Marriage:

The Siddi are an endogamous group. The exogamous sakhas govern their matrimonial alliances. Cross-cousin marriages are given preference, but parallel-cousin marriages are prohibited. Monogamy is the norm. Both *debartarni* (levirate) and *ghorghona* (sorrorate) marriage are allowed and practiced. Pre-puberty marriage was an earlier practice. At present, Siddi girls are married after attaining puberty. At present, the age at marriage varies from eighteen to twenty years for girls, while for boys it is between twenty to twenty five years. Mates are acquired by negotiations of parents. Bride-price exists in their society, the amount of which has been fixed by the *jamat* (traditional council). *Mehar* (promised money or article) fixed by the *jamat* is instantly paid to the bride. The value of the bride price is equivalent to five *tolas* of silver. Rule of residence after marriage is *patrilocal*. Divorce is permissible on grounds of adultery, mal-adjustment and cruelty. No compensation is to be given to wife in case of divorce. Only a husband can divorce his wife and in such cases the children become the liability of the father. Remarriage of widow, widower, male divorcee and female divorcee is permissible.²¹

Marriage is preceded by *mangni* (betrothal ceremony). Three to four days before marriage, *pithi* ceremony is observed in which both the bride and the groom are anointed with paste of turmeric powder and ground nut oil. The women folk sing local marriage songs on this occasion. A day before marriage the bride-groom moves around the village sitting on a horse back, called *-tuleka*. On the day of marriage, *mandavo* (marriage booth) is erected in front of the bride's house. *Kaji* (religious priest) conducts the *nikah* as per Islamic tradition. The female members sing marriage songs and perform *rasda* (a folk dance) till late night. On the next day the whole party (feast) is hosted by the bride's parents to a marriage feast. In the afternoon, the marriage party returns to groom's house along with bride. Before they leave, the bride receives *mameru* (the gifts from maternal uncle). Consummation of marriage takes place on the third day after marriage. The marriage rituals are being curtailed to reduce marriage expenditure on account of their poverty. Ceremonial feasts are only offered to the close relatives instead of all the villagers.

Food Habbits:

The Siddi are non-vegetarian. They eat buffalo meat, eggs, fish, fowls and goat meat. *Bajri* (spiked millet) and rice constitute their staple food. They consume all varieties of pulses like gram, *Lur* (pigeon pea), *masur* (lentils), etc. Groundnut oil is used as cooking medium. They also consume roots and tubers which they gather from the forest. They use all kinds of vegetables and fruits which are locally available to them. Consumption of milk and milk products is quite low among them. Lately, there has been an increase in the use of pulses and vegetables because of the soaring prices of non-vegetarian items. They abstain from eating beef. Their clans are known as *Morewana*, *Parmar*, *Mori*, *Bagia*, *Sirwan*, *Valia*, *Mosangra*, *Chovert*, *Darjada*, *Rayeka*, and *Nobi*. The sakhas are exogamous in nature. They settle matrimonial relations on the basis of these sakhas.

¹⁹ Dash K.N. (2004), *Invitation to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, pp. 72.

²⁰ Madan S N. (1989), *Dictionary of Anthropology*, New Delhi, Anmol Publications, pp. 202.

²¹ *Ibid.* 409-10

Folk Songs:

The Siddi do believe in folk tales and folk songs about their origin and migration. These folk songs are sung at the time of 'Dhamal dance (traditional folk dance) which is extremely popular in Saurashtra. Both males and females participate in rasda dance but the dhamal dance is performed exclusively by men only. They also have their traditional musical instruments. The Siddi accept both cooked and un-cooked food from any Hindu or Muslim except from the lower communities. They maintain linkages with regards to economic matters with the Kunbis, Lohanas, Memon, etc. Several of them work as labourers. Amongst the Siddi, there are some teachers, doctors and members in defence services.

Education:

The attitude of the Siddi towards formal education is favourable for boys but it is not favourable for girls. Boys study up to secondary level and the girls up to primary level. Boys, drop-out from formal education is high due to economic reasons. In case of girls, it is due to both social as well as economic reasons. They avail of both modern and traditional Medicare facilities. The attitude towards family planning programme is favourable. They prefer to have at least three children. Some of the Siddi have been benefited from the rural development program for the development of agriculture. Firewood, cow dung cakes are their main fuel resources. Their attitude towards saving has been found to be favourable but a large section is still dependent on money lenders.

Occupational Aspects:

Previously, the Siddis were dependent on hunting and gathering but at present their main source of livelihood is agriculture, daily wage earning which is done through employment as daily wage earners. Very few Siddi owns their land. Those who live in cities and towns are engaged in various occupations such as driving vehicles and motor repair work. Some Siddi are engaged in government services.

Almost all Siddi today subsist as farmers and daily wage labourers, contractual or in some cases bonded, some also work as domestic help. The earliest Siddisettlers who fled Goa and entered the Karnataka forests of North Canara, made the forests their home and started cultivation. In some of the villages in these areas, they form the earliest settlers. The Siddi of Yellapur are very honest and hardworking.

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Conclusion:

There is no single view of the social history of Siddi, for the origin of Siddi is disputed matter among scholars who have undertaken the work on Siddi and still doing study on social history of Siddi. However, a large number of scholars of the view that Siddi migrated to India. Siddi were forced to migrate during the age of discovery. The sailors of Portugal considering the physical strength were the first to recruit Siddi in order to facilitate their sea voyage. The Portuguese, who sailed to India through the Cape of Good Hope, brought with them Siddi to further their colonial and imperial ambitions. Siddi thus brought were put under harsh conditions and were frequently used like animals. These conditions were worse than animals. Muslim merchant who had bought them for manual labour brought Siddi to Gujarat. Having arrived in India, Muslim merchant sold them to Nabobs of Gujarat who used Siddi as hunting assistant domestic helping guard and in this way, Siddi settled in India on permanent basis.

As the time progressed, Siddi attuned them to host culture and tradition. In time, they lost their contact with their ancestors and their place of origin. Living in India, they embraced

religion of the land. Siddi of Karnataka embraced Hinduism, Islam and Christianity while Siddi of Gujarat embraced Islam.

Siddis are considered to be belonging to separate caste by the locals consider them to be superior and accordingly treated and make contact with Siddi. Although local invite Siddi at various occasion, they maintain a distance from Siddi considering them to be of social status. The prevalent caste system prevents them from entry the mainstream society, for people or upper caste resents there entry. However the advent of modernity of Siddi have managed to some extents to have place in the upper state of society but the number of Siddi who are having access upper state of the society is minimal. The backwardness of Siddi lay in their being uneducated and poor, and above all, apathy on the part of local government as well as Government at the centre. Most of Siddi face exploitation on daily basis and hands of local, especially people from upper caste and upper strata of the society. Siddi are even discriminated against in day-to-day life. Siddi are subjected to ill-treatment and even mocked for there being African. Many a time Siddi people are falsely implicated in crimes. The reason behind discrimination and ill-treatment of Siddi is prevalent stereotypes and misconceptions about Siddi. So in order to bring Siddi in mainstream society, it is imperative for the locals to abandon the stereotypes and misconceptions about Siddi. Besides, the Government should take special initiatives for their welfare and social assimilation.

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