



Extent of Private Schooling in Kerala: Some Insights from DISE Data

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Abstract - In the context of surge in academic engagements over increasing privatization of school education in the country, this paper examines the nature and extent of private schooling in the State of Kerala. In the absence of any realistic estimates on private schools and enrollments in them, this paper makes use of the raw data from District Information System for Education (DISE) for academic year 2016-17 to provide an over view of the schooling landscape in Kerala. It points towards rapid increase in enrollments in private schools across the State though regional disparities exist. It suggests for a more nuanced understanding of the reasons behind the increasing popularity of the private schools and its impacts on the issues of equity and inclusion in education.

Key Words: Kerala, private schooling, enrollments, DISE, equity

I. INTRODUCTION

A rising tendency of parents to opt for private schooling in India has drawn academic attention since the latter half of 1990s, when a hitherto unreported category of private schools, later called low-fee private (LFP) or budget schools, began mushrooming across the country. Against the backdrop of increased global advocacy for a reduced role of the State in education, these pro-private developments in the field of education led to a surge in research on school choice in the Indian context. However, unlike in the developed countries like UK and USA, in India, there is no mechanism of catchment areas or allotment of schools places in public schooling. Hence, hypothetically, parents are free to choose any public school for their ward from an available pool of schools in their locality or even at a distant place. However, distance turned out to be a major factor in deciding the school (Srivastava 2007) and mostly the neighbourhood public schools catered the educational needs of an average Indian household at least at the primary level. Till the 1990s, the sole exceptions to this were the elite households in urban centers, who had access to fee charging private schooling, mostly of recognized category. However, they had a negligibly small share in schooling. However, many empirical studies in the 1990s (e.g. Kingdon 1996a) reported the mushrooming of a new category of private schools across the country alike in urban as well as rural areas which were later called low free private (LFP) or budget schools. Almost all these schools started functioning outside the purview of the regulations of the state governments without obtaining recognition from any of the educational boards and hence remained and still continue to remain outside the official statistics in many states. Nevertheless, academic research on LFP schools suggested even socially and economically disadvantaged households accessing them in large numbers across the country.

However, even after several decades, no realistic data on the nature and extent of private schooling is available even in a State like Kerala, hailed for its achievements in school education both in terms of access and quality. The Economic Review, the annual pre-budget publication brought out by the State Government presented an unrealistic picture of the private sector schools in the State for several years (2010 to 2016). For example while it reported private unaided schools as just 6.82% of total schools in the year 2011-12 (GoK 2013) and 9 % in 2015-16 (GoK 2016) this was contradicted by numerous academic writings (Eg. Retnakumar & Arokiasamy 2003) and media reports (Eg. Cherukad 2013), which described an unprecedented growth of private schools and increasing enrolment in them since 2000s in the State. The state level statistics considered only the recognized schools in the private sector and it is disappointing that the even after several decades after Kingdon (1996b) reported this issue of non-reporting of unrecognized sector in official statistics, the issue remains still unresolved. The fact that even after the implementation of RTE Act in 2009, which mandates government recognition compulsory for the functioning of private schools, schools remain uncounted in government records is a matter of serious concern. Even a rough estimate of the volume of the private sector is not available in the absence of comprehensive studies on the subject.

In this context, this paper attempts to analyze the nature and extent of private schooling in the State of Kerala for providing a realistic picture of schooling landscape in Kerala. Making use of the raw data collected by District Information System for Education (DISE), it depicts the trajectory of growth of private schooling, its peculiar features and regional spread in the State of Kerala.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Even in the absence of reliable data on the extent of privatization in schooling sector in Kerala, literature suggest that Kerala witnessed an unprecedented growth of unaided educational institutions from elementary to professional levels since the 1990s (Kumar & George 2009). Broadly, the factors behind the growth of the unaided/self-financing private sector can be classified as economic, socio-political and academic.

One of the important factors that has influenced the growth of the fee-levying unaided private sector in the State is the changes that have occurred in Kerala's economy since the 1980s. Especially due to increased remittances from out-migrants and emigrants, the economy witnessed an increase in the per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) and per capita consumer expenditure (George & Sunaina 2005), which has arguably increased the capacity of households to pay for private education (Kumar & George 2009). However, ironically, this growth in household income did not help the state government which faced a recurrent financial crisis, forcing it to reduce its education expenditure from the 1990s. As a result, revenue expenditure as a proportion of the state domestic product (SDP) which was as high as 6.1% shrank to 3.3% in 2004-05 (*ibid*). Also, the share of education in total expenditure was reduced from 27.4% in the fifth FY plan period to 18.6% by the end of the tenth FY plan period (*ibid*). This seriously affected the capacity of the government to expand educational facilities especially in the higher education sector and this vacuum was apparently filled by private efforts.

Changes in the State's demographic pattern as a result of a declining fertility rate, and the consequent reduction in the household size and the number of children per household has been argued to be one of the factors increasing the capacity of households to pay for private education (George & Sunaina 2005, Kumar & George 2009). The average household size came down from 5.8 persons in 1981 to 4.7 in 2001 (Kumar & George 2009). A total fertility rate of 1.7 (1993) much below the replacement level of 2.05 resulted in a drastic reduction in the population of school-age children from the 1980s, and the population in the age group 5-14 years was projected to decline by 16% during the period from 1991 to 2021 (IrudayaRajan & Zachariah 1997).

The growth of fee-levying private institutions in Kerala can be partly attributed to the emergence of a new middle class which considers education 'as a means for social mobility and respectability' and is capable of 'buying its way in the educational sector' (Kumar & George 2009, p 59). It has been argued that the increased tendency of this new middle class, which has the 'political influence and financial clout' to set the development agenda in the State, to opt out of social services especially in education and health has 'led to the shifting of priorities of public spending away from social services' (*ibid* p 59). Conversely, on the supply side, the experience of various religious groups in providing educational facilities in the State has apparently come in handy for them in opening commercial ventures in education to fulfill the demand of this new middle class. Also, over the years, caste and community groups of all the major religions of the state have evolved into political pressure groups capable of overturning policy decisions that they perceive as against their interests. In Kerala, Christians (18.38%) and Muslims (26.56%) together constitute around 45% of the population (GoI 2011), and supersede Hindus in ownership of private educational institutions¹. In this context, the constitutionally guaranteed rights of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions has become an additional weapon in the armory of the Christian and Muslim religious groups and entrepreneurs to open private institutions without much government intervention (Kumar & George 2009). But it has also led to community groups from the majority (Hindu) religion also employing political pressure to get similar concessions. Even after the enactment of RTE Act 2009, which mandated the recognition of all schools within a period of three years, unrecognized private schools continue to function in Kerala as discussed in the next section. This reveals

¹Even in the absence of current official statistics on the ownership of private aided institutions in the state, it has been estimated from evidence collected using the RTI Act that of the 7140 aided schools in the state, 2596 (37%) are owned by Christians, 1384 (19%) by Muslims, and 2957 (41%) by Hindus (Sebastian 2019). In the case of aided colleges, the difference is more stark, with around 2/3rd of the institutions owned by minorities as against 30% by different Hindu communities (*ibid*).

the incapacity of the government to enforce policy norms that work against the interests of these pressure groups.

There have been arguments that the popularity of private education has its roots in the problem of the quality of public education in the State (Chakraborty 2005, George & Sunanina 2005), although this claim has not been backed by evidence from the ground. On the contrary, the literature on private schooling in the Indian context suggests that in many cases, parental preference for private schooling is interpreted by advocates of private education as evidence of its superior quality, overlooking several factors including the lure of the English medium education offered by such schools (Sarangapani 2009). Also, traditional schooling approaches followed by private schools, like mono-grade classes, teacher-oriented and textbook-based teaching methods are often considered by parents as the established pedagogic 'norms' and private schools are perceived to be of good quality because they follow these approaches (Sarangapani & Winch 2010). This has special relevance in the Kerala context. Like elsewhere in the country, large-scale educational reforms in Kerala were started in the 1990s with the implementation of the World Bank-aided District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in three educationally backward districts of the State, namely, Malappuram, Kasargode and Wayanad in 1994. In the second phase, three more districts, Palakkad, Idukki and Thiruvananthapuram were added in 1996. This led to the introduction of curriculum reforms first in DPEP districts in 1998 and then in non-DPEP districts in 1999. These reforms eventually evolved into the Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF) of 2007, which replaced the traditional teacher-centered teaching method with a new child-centered approach, which brought in radical changes in teaching methodology, preparation of textbooks and evaluation processes. While the textbooks underwent a thorough overhaul and became thinner, teachers' handbooks became thicker to assist teachers in activity-oriented teaching. Examinations were no longer memory-oriented and became less frequent. Parents, who until then had some idea of what their children were supposed to learn from the textbooks and what they had learned, as reflected in their marks in examinations, were now left with no clue of the educational achievements of their children. The haste with which the reforms were implemented and the attendant structural drawbacks exacerbated the situation. The fact that the reforms were applied only to public schools which followed the Kerala State syllabus, while private unaided schools continued to follow conventional textbook-based teaching methods led to suspicion among large sections, especially from working and lower middle classes, for whom private schooling remained unaffordable. To them, these reforms represented attempts to scuttle Kerala's achievements in the public education sector. Mainstream vernacular newspapers published many articles during this period, almost all of which presented a biased picture of the reforms, highlighting the drawbacks without examining the achievements. This reportedly led to a huge demand for the conventional textbook and examination-oriented schooling system offered by private unaided schools, and a mushrooming of private budget schools in large numbers from the latter half of the 1990s.

III. METHODOLOGY

The paper has used the secondary raw data available from District Information System for Education (DISE), collected and published by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) for the year 2016-17. Starting in 1995 as a pilot project, DISE has evolved into a reliable and robust source of data on several aspects of school education in the country over the years. As it reportedly covered all schools – recognized as well as unrecognized – unlike other government publication like the Economic Review, it could provide a more realistic picture of schooling in the country. However, since it collected self-declared but unverified information provided by the schools, cross verification of data to confirm the reliability was necessary. With regard to the recognition status of schools, given some definitional incompatibilities, we triangulated it against data from other sources. To confirm the recognition status of private schools, we checked the DISE data against the list of schools affiliated to the two central boards, CBSE and ICSE, and those recognized by the state government, all of which were collected from their respective websites. Although this exercise was time-consuming, the results were fruitful. Our compiled data almost matched the available official data on number of schools and enrolments for the year 2016-17. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that our analysis of DISE data on private schooling provides a largely reliable picture of the private schooling landscape in the State.

The schools in India can be classified mainly into four, namely, government (G), private aided (PA), private unaided recognized (PUR) and private unaided unrecognized (PUUR) (Baird 2009, Kingdon 1996a). For the purpose of this study, the first two are categorized as public schools on account of similar

characteristics. They are publically funded, no tuition fees are charged from students, teachers' salaries are paid by the government, follow a common syllabus within a state and not supposed to deny admission to any student in normal case. On the other hand, the latter two are categorized as private schools. They are privately funded, mainly in the form of fees collected from the students from which the salaries of the teachers are paid. While the PUR schools functioned within some state regulations with a formal recognition of either a central board (i.e. ICSE and CBSE) or the respective state board, PUUR schools often functioned outside the purview of state regulations without any restrictions.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Nature and Extent of Private Schooling in Kerala

Our analysis brought out interesting results. As evident from Table 1, of the 17,144 schools listed by DISE, 5021 (29.29%) were government (G), 7220 (42.11%) were private aided (PA), 2675 (15.61%) were private unaided recognized (PUR) and 2228 (13%) were private unaided unrecognized (PUUR). Thus, as definition adopted by this study, public schools comprised roughly 71% and private schools around 29%. The PUR schools can be further broken up into 1205 schools (or 7.03% of the total) recognized by the state government, and 1470 (or 8.58%) recognized by the two central boards, namely CBSE and ICSE. However, the shares in enrolments from class I to X are 22.62% (G), 42.73% (PA), 30.17% (PUR) and 13.07% (PUUR) respectively (see Table 2). That PUR schools affiliated to the central boards, which formed just 8.58% of all schools, had almost thrice the share of enrolments (21.58%) is definitely an indicator of their growing popularity. Also, the fact that even after recognition of schools was made mandatory by RTE Act 2009, roughly 5% of the students in Kerala studied in unrecognized schools points to their continued patronage by at least a small section of the society, and to the inability of the state government to close down such establishments.

Table 1. District Wise Number of Schools in Kerala

No	Districts	Government		Private Aided		Private Unaided Recognized				Private Unaided Unrecognized		Total	
		N	%	N	%	State Syllabus		CBSE & ICSE		N	%	N	%
						N	%	N	%				
1	Kasaragod	354	44.14	216	26.94	80	9.98	53	6.61	99	12.35	802	100
2	Kannur	299	17.96	963	57.84	83	4.99	106	6.37	214	12.86	1665	100
3	Wayanad	209	48.27	113	26.1	20	4.62	33	7.63	58	13.4	433	100
5	Kozhikode	349	20.89	867	51.89	100	5.99	91	5.45	264	15.8	1671	100
5	Malappuram	599	30.6	810	41.37	213	10.88	124	6.34	212	10.83	1958	100
6	Palakkad	360	27.74	585	45.07	93	7.17	83	6.4	177	13.64	1298	100
7	Thrissur	265	20.63	685	53.31	90	7.01	133	10.36	112	8.72	1285	100
8	Ernakulam	386	27.07	540	37.87	129	9.05	223	15.64	148	10.38	1426	100
9	Idukki	301	41.87	256	35.61	35	4.87	57	7.93	70	9.74	719	100
10	Kottayam	312	26.67	560	47.87	61	5.22	127	10.86	110	9.41	1170	100
11	Alappuzha	335	32.31	394	38	53	5.12	100	9.65	155	14.95	1037	100
12	Pathanamthitta	264	28.42	427	45.97	50	5.39	70	7.54	118	12.71	929	100
13	Kollam	432	33.57	440	34.19	87	6.76	126	9.8	202	15.7	1287	100
14	Thiruvananthapuram	556	37.98	364	24.87	111	7.59	144	9.84	289	19.75	1464	100
	Kerala	5021	29.29	7220	42.12	1205	7.03	1470	8.58	2228	13	17144	100
	State Data	4695		7220		1066		1436		NA		14417	

Source: Compiled from DISE data for 2016-17. State data taken from GoK, 2017

Table 2. District Wise and Type Wise Enrolment of Students in Kerala

No	Districts	Government		Private Aided		Private Unaided Recognized				Private Unaided Unrecognized		Total	
						State Syllabus		CBSE & ICSE					
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Kasaragod	86182	38.76	65913	29.64	25952	11.68	34178	15.37	10154	4.57	222379	100
2	Kannur	72148	18.46	196943	50.38	23934	6.13	77382	19.8	20581	5.27	390988	100
3	Wayanad	56474	41.17	49193	35.87	6345	4.63	19463	14.19	5699	4.16	137174	100
5	Kozhikode	113377	23.53	241542	50.13	32749	6.8	67561	14.03	26635	5.53	481864	100
5	Malappuram	238600	28.81	392617	47.4	95159	11.49	80697	9.75	21327	2.58	828400	100
6	Palakkad	115863	26.53	192783	44.14	44491	10.19	63784	14.61	19863	4.55	436784	100
7	Thrissur	59364	13.36	218588	49.2	40396	9.1	111633	25.13	14383	3.24	444364	100
8	Ernakulam	44027	9.66	180301	39.53	41355	9.07	174104	38.17	16410	3.6	456197	100
9	Idukki	30878	21.41	63808	44.23	9873	6.85	34347	23.81	5375	3.73	144281	100
10	Kottayam	24312	9.27	128860	49.13	14814	5.65	84311	32.15	9999	3.82	262296	100
11	Alappuzha	50861	18.7	115235	42.37	11835	4.36	78510	28.87	15581	5.73	272022	100
12	Pathanamthitta	21020	14.51	57459	39.66	10098	6.97	45128	31.15	11174	7.72	144879	100
13	Kollam	94152	25.36	131840	35.51	28039	7.56	99148	26.71	18108	4.88	371287	100
14	Thiruvananthapuram	133185	29.71	119006	26.54	47796	10.66	117622	26.24	30802	6.87	448411	100
	Kerala	1140443	22.63	2154088	42.73	432836	8.59	1087868	21.58	226091	4.49	5041326	100
	State Govt. Data	1126243		2156965		418369		NA		NA		3701577	

Source: Compiled from DISE data for 2016-17. State govt. data taken from GoK, 2016

Timeline of Establishment of Private Schools

The DISE data provides the year of establishment of all schools in the database, and although the veracity of this self-declared data cannot be assured, it nevertheless provides some clues on the time period of the growth of fee-levying private schooling in the state. It is important to note that the data in the case of PUR schools did not reflect their actual period of growth, as the recognition might have been received well after their establishment. Our analysis, compiled in Table 3 therefore provides a broad overall profile rather than exact figures. Though a substantial number of private schools (around 9%) were in existence before the 1980s, the data shows a surge in their growth during the decades of 1990-99 and 2000-09, with more than two-third (71%) of the schools established during that period. This timeline is similar to that of the LFP schools reported elsewhere in India. Also, as discussed above, this period was marked by the introduction of large scale pedagogic reforms in public schooling and a subsequent demand for the traditional schooling methods offered by private schools.

Table 3: Growth of Private Unaided Schools in Kerala

Period	Number of Schools				Percentage
	PUR(S)	PUR (OS)	PUUR	Total	
Before 1980	237	105	83	425	8.67
1980-89	230	157	226	613	12.51

1990-99	378	527	551	1456	29.7
2000-09	320	657	1079	2056	41.94
2010-16	35	24	286	345	7.04
Data Not Provided	5	0	3	8	0.17
Total	1205	1470	2228	4903	100

Abundance of Private Recognized Schooling

One important feature of private schooling in Kerala that appeared to be different from the private schooling scenario reported elsewhere in the country was that PUR schools outnumbered PUUR schools both in terms of numbers and student enrolment. There has been a steady increase in the number of PUR schools, from 946 in 2010-11 (GoK, 2011) to 1470 in 2016-17. On the other hand, the number of PUUR schools shows a decline from 2646 in 2009 (GoK, 2009) to 2228 in 2016-17. This rise in the number of PUR schools and a corresponding decline in PUUR schools can be attributed largely to the increasing number of schools getting recognition from either the state or central boards. Also, some PUUR schools might have closed down due to poor patronage.

Table 4. Type Wise and Standard Wise Enrolment of Students in Kerala

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
G	92813	95053	96457	99497	99787	102812	109332	139758	150203	154731	1140443
	18.94	19.21	19.63	20.38	20.13	20.74	21.79	27	28.3	28.96	22.63
PA	159093	165889	171946	176706	219794	229374	240728	252241	268070	270247	2154088
	32.47	33.52	34.99	36.19	44.33	46.27	47.98	48.73	50.5	50.58	42.73
Public Sub Total	251906	260942	268403	276203	319581	332186	350060	391999	418273	424978	3294531
	51.40	52.72	54.61	56.55	64.44	67.00	69.76	75.72	78.80	79.54	65.35
PUR State Syllabus	57022	55589	54622	52116	40845	38023	36996	33262	31922	32439	432836
	11.64	11.24	11.12	10.68	8.24	7.67	7.38	6.43	6.02	6.08	8.59
PUR CBSE & ICSE	129910	131916	126626	121839	116900	111856	103891	87782	80277	76871	1087868
	26.51	26.66	25.77	24.95	23.58	22.56	20.71	16.96	15.13	14.39	21.58
PUUR	51234	46541	41862	38198	18584	13757	10869	4623	400	23	226091
	10.46	9.41	8.52	7.83	3.75	2.78	2.17	0.9	0.08	0.01	4.49
Private Sub Total	238166	234046	223110	212153	176329	163636	151756	125667	112599	109333	1746795
	48.60	47.28	45.39	43.45	35.56	33.00	30.24	24.28	21.20	20.46	34.65
Grand Total	490072	494988	491513	488356	495910	495822	501816	517666	530872	534311	5041326
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Compiled from DISE data for 2016-17

Table 5. Selected Schooling and Economic Indicators

No	Districts	Private Enrolment*	Proportion of Private Enrolment to Total Enrolment in the District*	Per Capita Income 2016-17 (in Rs.)^	Proportion of HHS that received Remittances by Emigrants #
1	Kasaragod	70284	31.62	105555	19.2
2	Kannur	121897	31.2	116982	20.3
3	Wayanad	31507	22.98	95715	10.8
5	Kozhikode	126945	26.36	113307	19.8
5	Malappuram	197183	23.82	94012	33.9
6	Palakkad	128138	29.35	103855	9.7
7	Thrissur	166412	37.47	135518	15.3
8	Ernakulam	231869	50.84	162297	4.2
9	Idukki	49595	34.39	135316	5.0
10	Kottayam	109124	41.62	132267	12.7
11	Alappuzha	105926	38.96	143542	14.5
12	Pathanamthitta	66400	45.84	103460	16.5
13	Kollam	145295	39.15	143638	22.9
14	Thiruvananthapuram	196220	43.77	129137	14.2
	Kerala	1746795		123707	16.3

Source: Adopted from different sources. * Compiled from DISE raw data 2016-17; ^ Taken from

GoK, 2017

Taken from Zachariah & Rajan (2019)

Regional Disparities

Regional variations in terms of private school enrollment were evident from the data. In general, we found the districts which were part of the erstwhile Travancore-Cochin region had private enrolments higher than the state average (34.66%). Of these, Ernakulam topped the list with more than 50% of schoolchildren attending private schools. Private enrolments were substantial in the districts of Pathanamthitta (45.84), Thiruvananthapuram (43.77) and Kottayam (41.62). On the other hand, districts in the Malabar region recorded comparatively lower private enrolments. Wayanad had the least number of private enrollments at 23%. In the case of PUR schools and PUUR schools, similar trends were noticed among the districts.

In order to find out whether the income of a region had any influence on the private school enrolments as suggested by the literature, the per capita income of the districts were compared with the private enrolment trends. In general, it was found that private enrolments were higher in districts with higher per capita income and vice versa (see Table5). The only exception was the district of Pathanamthitta, which was ranked 2nd in private enrolments even with a rank of 12 in terms of per capita income among the districts. Statistically, we got a correlation coefficient of 0.41 between the two, which suggested a moderate positive relationship between per capita income and private enrolments.

Also, in order to examine the influence of foreign remittances in the districts on private enrolments, the district level data on percentage of households that received remittances was compared with the data on proportion of private enrolments in the districts. We found that, although the proportion of households that received foreign remittances was higher in districts in the Malabar region; private enrolments were comparatively lower in the region. Conversely, in the district of Ernakulam which topped in terms of private enrolments, the proportion of households that received remittances was the least. Statistically also, a correlation coefficient of -0.39 suggested an inverse correlation between the two.

Increasing popularity of Private Schooling

The analysis of standard-wise enrolments of students in each type of school provided in table 2.3 points towards an increasing popularity of private schooling over the years. If we presume that all the students enrolled in class I in a particular type of school continue there at least up to class IV (the final stage of primary class in Kerala), then those studying in class IV in 2016-17 would have been in class I in 2013-14. It turns out that while in 2013-14, 43.45% were enrolled in class I, this increased to 48.60% in 2016-17 registering around 5% growth in private enrolments during the four year period. Interestingly, more than half of this increase (around 2.6%) was found to be absorbed by PUUR schools. In the case of PUR schools affiliated to CBSE and ICSE, most of which offer a full cycle of education from class I to class X, a significant dip in the proportion of enrolment observed while moving from class VII to VIII suggests a pattern of switching from private schooling to public schooling at the secondary level.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the nature and extent of private schooling in Kerala based on DISE raw data for 2016-17. The finding that roughly 29% of the total schools are private and they apportion roughly 35% of the total enrollments up to secondary education in the State contradicts the official figures in this regard. Moreover, the fact that share of private schools in class I enrollments in the State rose from 43% to 49% within a short period of time points towards the increasing popularity of private schooling. This trend of increasing privatization will have serious implications on equity and inclusion in education in the State, hailed for a universal and all-inclusive schooling system. Though we found a moderate positive relationship between per capita income and private enrolments in the districts, the relationship between foreign remittance and private enrollments was found to be inverse. This calls for an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the reasons behind the increasing popularity of private schooling.

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