

The Philanthropic Ideals in Imam Ali's Rule

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Philanthropic Ideals in Imam Ali's Rule

Izzatullah Mawlaniya and Mahmud Rida Tawakkuli

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Abstract

Philanthropy enjoys a unique position in human relations. Issues related to philanthropy have constantly caught the attention of man throughout human history. The concept of philanthropy and its issues have been time and again reviewed and deliberated upon by scholars and intellectuals. Philanthropy is a capacious word. Writing an article on it, or even authoring a book for that matter, would not suffice to discuss all problems surrounding it, as this requires comprehensive research and ample time.

However, among the issues directly associated with philanthropy is that of governance, that is, the manner in which the state treats its citizens, and the degree to which the statesmen respect and stand for human dignity in relation to their subjects.

This paper examines the ethical ideals in the practice of Imam Ali particularly as illustrated in his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, and demonstrates the philanthropic principles that statesmen ought to observe vis-à-vis their subjects from the viewpoint of the Imam. Being just with people, consulting them in matters related to the society, being open to criticism, fighting against institutionalised discrimination, being answerable to the masses, establishing peace and security in the society, and the like, are among some philanthropic principles given by Imam Ali which shall be reflected upon.

Preamble

Man is a social being by nature. On the one hand, he is not able to survive and prosper without founding a human community and cooperating with fellow human beings; on the other hand, the very social life of man requires special conditions without which the prosperity of human societies would be imperilled.

Furthermore, man is constituted of two dimensions: human and animal. The human dimension drives him to acquire lofty and angelic attributes, whereas the animal dimension presses him to take up the path of animal instincts such as excessive eating, sleeping, and anger. Therefore, it is necessary for man to be guided toward lofty human traits and for human societies to have the right system of administration based on divine teachings.

As the final and most complete of all divine religions, Islam has sufficiently addressed these two realities pertaining to man and society without any shortcoming. However, beside the Qur'an, we have also the practice (sirah) of the Prophet of Islam and his progeny as a source of guidance for mankind.

The exercising of love of people by political leaders and statesmen is indeed an essential element in the administration of a society and in the directing it towards perfection. In other words, how the government functionaries treat their subjects and their responsibilities in this regard, as well as the degree of respect to human dignity shown by the state are extremely instrumental in the prosperity of a society. For this reason, much attention has been given to this matter in Islamic sources.

Imam Ali (a) carefully addressed the matter in its different dimensions and has presented the right course of action to humankind in the form of principles; if implemented, they would guarantee the stability of a society as well as the material and spiritual development of mankind.

A cursory look at the modern societies, especially Western societies, clearly reveal that the socio-political ideas that dominate them are all based on the incorrect perception of the philanthropic ideals which, in turn, has led to the failure of their implementation.

The only achievement of the modern materialistic thought until now is that it has transformed man into a commodity and subjected the concept of human dignity to scepticism. The reality is that this materialistic civilization tries to cover the shameful degradation of modern man under the guise of material prosperity, the impropriety of which has been admitted even by the proponents of this civilization. The bitter truth is that modern man has not been able to retrieve his lost treasure amidst material prosperity.

Moreover, could it be imagined that one could search for and find such basic human ideals as dignity, honour, freedom, liberality, justice, equality, brotherhood, love, philanthropy, and sacrifice amidst the iron wheels of industrialization? The sad reality is that modern society has relinquished the precious gems of humanity and philanthropy in return for industrialization and material progress. What a malign transaction this has been. What else other than turning away from the divine teachings could be the reason for such a tragedy?

This paper aims at pointing out to some philanthropic principles concerning the relationship between the state and the citizen in light of Imam Ali's letter to Malik al-Ashtar. This letter was apparently written to Malik but it has been, in fact, addressed to all political leaders, statesmen, and government functionaries for all times to come. These are a set of principles whose enforcement by the statesmen would guarantee the subsistence and happiness of a society.

It is worth mentioning that the relationship between the people and the statesmen is reciprocal in nature such that the citizens of the state also have responsibilities towards their rulers as it has been demonstrated in the words of Imam Ali. However, this topic is beyond the constraints of this paper.

The Philanthropic Principles in the Practice of Imam Ali (a)

The core discussion concerns the primary duties of the statesmen vis-à-vis their subjects in light of critical reflection on the Imam's letter. We shall focus on the philanthropic principles illustrated in this letter.

Reforming the Self

Purification of the soul is a firm foothold for upholding political leadership and administration, and a requisite for love of humankind. Self-purification serves as a qualifying test for undertaking the crucial responsibility of serving the people. According to Imam Ali, unless one passes this test, one is not entitled to step into this enterprise.

Imam Ali (a) maintains that a political ruler ought to realize within himself such spiritual consciousness that the political position he holds would not impinge on his personality and influence his decisions. In one of his letters to his military commanders, he says, from the servant of God, Ali bin Abi Talib, the Commander of the Faithful, to the territorial garrisons¹.

As it is apparent from this statement, the Imam is referring to himself as the slave of God. This implies that the political supremacy could not breed vainglory in the Imam, as his only pride was that he was the servant of God. Further in the letter, he states:

The ruler ought not to change [behaviour] against his people due to the acquisition of wealth or endowment with exclusive distinction; rather, what Allah has bestowed on him of His bounties should increase him in earning proximity to His creatures and being sympathetic towards his brethren².

According to Imam Ali (a), holding an administrative post is considered as a platform of service to the people, not an opportunity for misappropriation of public wealth or making people indebted to oneself.

Caring for people and acting on the basic principles of humanity are among the things recognized and endorsed by the Imam in these few lines of his letter.

As a matter of fact, Imam Ali (a) considers individual reform to be a necessary requisite for any kind of social reform. He says: I wonder at a person who undertakes the reforming of other people while he himself is more corrupt than any other being³.

In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar also, the Imam invites him to God-consciousness, to restrain the commanding self (al-nafs al-ammarah), and to refrain from pride and vainglory. Allamah Muhammad Taqi Ja'fari says in this regard:

In this charter, particularly in its prelude, building the personality of Malik through God-consciousness (taqwa) and preparing him to develop the sense of dedication toward the administration of the society

has been the greatest concern of Imam Ali – the Master of the God-fearing⁴.

He further continues and says:

The directives of the Imam on self-reform to Malik al-Ashtar, who is himself the executor of the charter, substantiate best the claim that for the proper administration of the society and procurement of social felicity, the proficiency of the executor of law is more effectual and important than the law itself.

It is true that the divine laws guarantee complete felicity for humankind only if its executor is also divine; however, critical historical analysis into the social life of human societies attest to the fact that a society which has the best law does not necessarily enjoy the best standard of life, because the competency or incompetency of the one who enforces the law bears greater significance and impact than the law itself⁵.

It is based on this very outlook that the Imam says on another occasion:

“How can a wicked person remedy other people?⁶”

On the same note, he says in sermon 175 of Nahj al-Balaghah referring to himself:

O people! By Allah I do not impel you to obedience except after I have preceded you in it; and I do not restrain you from disobedience except after I have desisted from it before you⁷.

With regard to the necessity of self-reform by the leaders and administrators of the society, Imam Ali (a) says:

Whoever puts himself up as a leader of the people ought to start with educating himself before educating others as he ought to discipline [the people] through his conduct before he does so through his tongue. One who educates his self and disciplines it is more worthy of reverence than he who educates the people and disciplines them⁸.

Purification of the soul holds such a great position in the eyes of the Imam that in both of his two extended letters, one to his son Imam Hasan and another to Malik al-Ashtar, he proffers essential guidelines for the rearing of a complete, believing, and virtuous human being.

It could be indisputably said that if there was nothing in the words of the Imam concerning self-purification beside these two letters, they would have definitely sufficed to show the degree of importance given by the Imam to this notion.

After discussing self-reform as an essential requisite for undertaking an administrative post, we shall henceforth examine the philanthropic principles in the words of Imam Ali (a), particularly in light of his letter to Malik al-Ashtar as mentioned earlier.

Observing Justice

Justice and impartiality of the state in giving privileges and services to the citizens is among the primary

ethical ideals in the Islamic political system. Failure to abide by this ideal would naturally call into question the very basis of the Islamic government. It is precisely due to this reason that Imam Ali (a) attached great significance to this principle and beckoned for it.

Imam Ali (a) set out to enforce justice in the social and political system of his society by starting, first and foremost, with himself as the head of state, and thereafter with his ministers, governors, and close associates. This feature in the rule of Ali grants him distinction from other political rulers and thinkers.

Part of his letter to Malik al-Ashtar reads as follows:

Be just with God and be just with people [giving them what is their due] from yourself, from your close relatives, and from those of your subjects towards whom you are most affectionate. If you fail to do this, you will be an oppressor. And he who oppresses the servants of God will find that God, as well as His servants, will oppose him⁹.

From the viewpoint of Imam Ali (a), justice serves as the strongest support for any social system. The Almighty God has decreed justice to be a means to straighten human affairs on the earth and to protect man from oppression, disorder, and disobedience; as it is through justice only that social laws can be revived in the society and effectively put into force¹⁰. He also says in the same letter:

The greatest source of joy for the governors is the establishment of justice in the land, and the emanation of love from his subjects¹¹.

Imam Ali (a) was determined even to put right the injustices that were committed in the previous administrations before him:

By Allah, if I were to find that through this [misappropriation of public funds] women have been married or slave-girls have been purchased, I would surely get it back; for there is indeed comfort in justice. And whoever finds justice distressing, then injustice would be even more distressing for him¹².

In his letter, the Imam also portrayed his concern over the issue of appointment of unbiased juries who would pursue the course of serving the public and establish justice in the society is also vital:

Choose as judges those whom you consider the most excellent of your subjects those who are not confused by complex matters, nor angered by disputants; who do not persist in error, and are not reticent about turning to the truth when they perceive it; whose souls are not susceptible to avarice; who, dissatisfied with a superficial understanding, will probe deeply¹³.

Public Cooperation

Consulting the public and seeking their input on matters affecting them is an essential element in administering a society. This would naturally enhance collaboration between the state and its citizens,

and would encourage people to assist the statesmen.

Public cooperation on the part of the statesmen exhibits itself in consultation with the public and in providing a platform to them to voice their opinions. This matter constitutes, in the context of the Islamic government, one of the most important pillars of philanthropy.

Respect to the public and taking their opinion as the basis of running the society, either directly through their right of voting or indirectly through their respective representatives, are among the commendable ideals in the Islamic government.

Imam Ali (a) put great emphasis on this ideal as he considered it to be the undisputable right of the public. In sermon 216 of the Nahj al-Balaghah, the Imam insists on the fact that a ruler ought to consult the public in matters related to them and to know their opinion. In sermon 205, the Imam states:

Verily, I do not see myself to be above making any mistake, nor do I consider myself immune of it in my actions, except in what Allah protects me from that of my soul over which He has more control than myself¹⁴.

According to Imam Ali, consultation is an important principle in life which ought to be observed by everyone in crucial matters, for he who seeks advice has associated himself with their knowledge¹⁵.

To act on this principle is essential for all the rulers and administrators, as the decisions they make determine the fate of the society. However, failure to do so would raise the probability of them making an incorrect decision due to lack of thorough study of all dimensions of a matter and inadequate knowledge of the perspectives of others.

In this very regard the Imam says, "*He who entertains different opinions would realize the instances of errors*¹⁶." It is in view of this that Imam Ali (a) recommends to Malik al-Ashtar that he should study much with the scholars and hold discourses with the sages so that he may make use of their knowledge and experience for the wellbeing of the society.

Therefore, the Islamic government is duty-bound to involve its citizens in the policy-making process, and the experts or organizations it consults need to stem from the public and truly represent their interests¹⁷.

However, according to sermon 205 of Nahj al-Balaghah, public consultation is only to take place in matters whose ruling has not appeared in the Qur'an or the practice (Sunnah) of the Holy Prophet (s); in other than this case this principle would not apply¹⁸.

The Imam himself used to resolutely rule down the opinion of his advisors if it stood in contrast with the truth. For example, he is reported to have told Ibn 'Abbas, "*It is your right to advise me and I am obliged to look into it, but if I thereafter make a decision contrary to your opinion, then you ought to obey me*¹⁹."

Being Open to Political Critics

In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) plainly points out to the fact that truth is always hard to accept for the rulers and administrators²⁰. However, the Imam maintains that it is extremely necessary for this class of people to develop the spirit of accepting the truth; for he who finds difficult to accept the truth would find acting on it to be even more difficult²¹.

As the head of state, Imam Ali (a) would himself urge people to remind him of the truth in all situations, and not to consider him as immune to making mistakes or needless of any advice and counsel²².

Hence, possessing the spirit of accepting criticism is, from the viewpoint of Imam Ali (a), among the significant qualities of a ruler, such that he ought not to get annoyed by listening to the comments of his critics; rather, he should welcome and respect their views and try to work on them if, at all, they happen to be right. This is the very principle of respecting others' opinions which is considered to be one of the standards of philanthropy in the avenue of governance.

In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, which is, in the actual fact, the charter of the governance of Ali (a), the Imam advises him saying:

Within this group, give preference to the one who most sincerely speaks the truth, however bitter it may be to you, and who supports you least in doing that which God dislikes for His friends, however painfully this may strike at your desires²³.

According to Imam Ali (a), the political critics need to be also fully supported by the Islamic government. He would himself object to the deviations of the previous rulers before him as well as extend his full support for the political critics. Among such critics was Abu Dharr al-Ghaffari who used to audaciously voice his criticisms against the government and openly accuse its functionaries of financial corruption to the extent that the caliph of the time had no choice but to send him into exile.

However, Abu Dharr enjoyed complete support of the Imam throughout this period, as he together with his two sons and a group of his followers sided with him until the final moments before his extradition²⁴.

Imam Ali (a) himself was subjected to criticism, at times in a disrespectful manner, but he would never get disappointed by such criticisms and would rather always try to convince his critics through reasoning and logical answers.

This is the manner in which Imam Ali (a) would respect the rights of other people even though they were his opponents. Does this attitude signify but adherence to philanthropic principles, respect for freedom of speech, and regard for human rights?

One day Malik al-Ashtar objected to the Imam about his nomination of the children of 'Abbas for the government posts. Justifying his appointments, he replied to him saying, "If at this stage you know of

people more capable than them, let me know and I shall appoint them for these offices²⁵.”

Regarding the necessity of being tolerant to criticism, the founder of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Late Imam Khomeini says:

We should never think that none has the right of objection on what we say or do. To criticize, or rather to point out faults, is a divine gift for the development of humankind²⁶.

In the eyes of Ali, the ruler and the ruled all enjoy equal rights, and they are all equal before the law. Affluence, association with a political party, or belonging to a particular social class can, in no way, give legal distinction to a group of people over the other. The Imam maintains that even the government functionaries and officers ought not to consider themselves to be superior to the ordinary citizens and to subsequently demand for extra legal rights²⁷.

Adherence to the law and combating favoritism has a special place in the life and practice of Imam Ali. He would enforce the law of God regardless of the personality and social status of the person involved. In one incident, he strongly turned down any mediation to pardon a member of the tribe of Asad from being flogged according to the Shari'ah law²⁸.

Similarly, when Najjashi – the poet and propagandist loyal to Imam Ali (a) in the battle of Siffin was convicted of anti-Islamic behaviour, the Imam subjected him to the Islamic punishment. As a result, Najjashi separated from the Imam and joined the camp of Mu'awiyah.

That the truth ought to be defended at any cost is among the most fundamental principles in the school of Ahlul Bayt. However, the mode of defence would vary as per the conditions prevailing in every age.

In his letter to one of his governors who misappropriated the public funds, Imam Ali says:

By Allah, if Hasan and Husayn were to do what you have done, there would have been no clemency on my part for them, nor could they have affected my determination until I have taken back the right from them and have done away with the wrong produced by their unjust action²⁹.

Thus, adherence to the law by the rulers and statesmen, and their holding everyone equal before it, is undoubtedly among the philanthropic ideals in the relation between the statesmen and the citizens which was repeatedly called for and acted upon by Imam Ali.

Accountability to the People and Being among Them

Among the other important duties of the government officers and one of the undisputable right of the citizens, is that the officials have to be available to people; they should have active presence in public assemblies, respond to the queries of the people, and address their concerns. In other words, the sources and channels of information utilized by the statesmen ought to be more comprehensive and not

limited to indirect sources only.

Furthermore, the citizens should have all the right to voice their views and complains openly and explicitly, without any constraints³⁰.

In his recommendations to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali states:

Apportion a part of your time to those who have special needs, making yourself free to attend to them personally, sitting with them in a public assembly with all due humility before God, your Creator.

Keep your soldiers, guards, and officers away from them so that they can speak to you in an uninhibited manner, for I heard the Messenger of God say – God bless him and his family – on more than one occasion, ‘A nation in which the rights of the weak are not wrested in an uninhibited manner from the strong will never be blessed.’ Bear patiently any coarseness or inarticulate expression that they might manifest; do not show any irritation or disdain towards them³¹.

Thus, according to Imam Ali (a), the head of state and his ministers ought to be answerable to the people and address their problems without any sort of bureaucratic behaviour or regulation. He advises Malik at length in this regard and says:

In addition to all of this, do not prolong any period of absence from your subjects, for the isolation of the governors from their subjects is a kind of constriction and causes deficiency in awareness of their affairs. Such isolation cuts rulers off from acquiring knowledge about things hidden from them, so that which is great will appear small, and that which is small, great; the beautiful will appear ugly, and the ugly, beautiful; the true will be mixed with the false.

The governor is but a human being: he cannot know what people hide from him. There are no visible signs on the truth, by virtue of which apparent expressions of veracity can be distinguished from falsehood.

You can only be one of two types: either a man who gives himself generously for the sake of the truth – in which case why seclude yourself [thereby preventing yourself] from bestowing a necessary right or performing an honourable deed? Or else you are a man afflicted with refusal [to give of oneself] in which case, how quickly people will refrain from making requests of you, despairing of your generosity! This, despite the fact that [fulfilling] most of the needs which people present to you is not burdensome, whether they be complaints against injustice or demands for fairness in transactions³².

What is striking of the above piece of advice is that the Imam’s recommendation entails ultimate respect for the public in that it insists on the presence of Malik among the people not with the aim of deceiving them or securing their votes; rather, in order for him to come to know of the public opinion, needs, and demands³³. In his letter to his governor of Mecca, Imam Ali says:

You ought not to have any ambassador to the public but your tongue, nor any guard but your face. Do

not stop any needy from meeting with you, for if he is returned unsatisfied from your door in the first instance, then even fulfilling it thereafter shall not bring you praise³⁴.

Knowledge of public demands and the necessity of addressing them is so important in the rule of Imam Ali that he highlights the matter for Malik al-Ashtar in the following manner:

Keep a watchful eye over the affairs of those who have no access to you, and who are disdained by men of high standing. Appoint from among those you trust a God-fearing and humble person to be responsible for bringing their affairs to your attention. Treat these people in a manner such that God may excuse you on the day you meet Him³⁵.

For those of his citizens who were not willing for any reason to verbally voice their complaints and criticisms against the head of state or other government functionaries, the Imam had established an independent office during his rule called Dar al-Qisas (House of Reports) for receiving public grievances in written form.

Good Conduct of the Statesmen Vis-à-Vis the Citizens

The following lines below from Imam Ali's letter to Malik al-Ashtar demonstrate the position of good behaviour of the statesmen in the rule of Ali. Although apparently written to Malik, this letter has been, in the actual fact, addressed to all political leaders, statesmen, and government functionaries of all times. The underlying message of the letter calls upon the political leaders and administrators to have high regard for their people and treat them on human principles. The Imam writes:

Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them, and kindness towards them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. For they are of two types: either your brother in religion or your like in creation. Mistakes slip from them, defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness and your pardon, just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon³⁶.

These lines are replete with such philanthropic ideals as being kind and humble with people, being generous and sympathetic towards them, treating them equally, eliminating ethnic discrimination, and the like.

Acting against Breach of Public Trust by the Government Officials

How the state officials and government functionaries handle the government resources at hand is among the sensitive issues closely followed by the public. Proper use of these resources would provide mental security to the public, and increase their confidence in the government's commitment towards improving its citizen's standard of life. On the contrary, the mishandling of these resources shall have serious

implications, the most detrimental of which would perhaps be the public's loss of confidence in the government, and the rise in economic insecurity in the society.

Therefore, the state ought to take necessary measures to ensure the proper use of government resources, and at the same time firmly act against any form of misappropriation of public funds.

In his letter to Ziyad bin Abih – the deputy governor of Basrah, Imam Ali (a) says:

I swear by Allah and I am resolute in my oath, that if I come to know that you have misappropriated the funds of the Muslims – small or big – I shall take you to task such that it will leave you empty-handed, without means of sustaining your family, and humiliated³⁷.

In a similar letter to his governor of Azerbaijan – Ash'ath bin Qays, the Imam reprimands him on his misconduct and reminds him that he should not consider his assignment to be a means of acquiring wealth; rather, it is a trust on his shoulders that must be preserved. He also notes that as a governor, he is accountable to the authority who has appointed him for the office, and ought not to act freely in the affairs of the public without clear instructions from the head of state³⁸.

This matter is so crucial that the Imam gives his approval to corporal punishment in relation to those officials who breach the public trust:

Also pay attention to your assistants: should any one of them stretch his hand towards some treacherous deeds and your observers are unanimous in their report, which you deem sufficient evidence of the act then impose corporal punishment upon him. Let him be chastised on account of the affliction affected by his act. Let him be disgraced, brand him a traitor, and gird him with the ignominy of accusation³⁹.

These words speak volumes about the importance attached to justice and public rights by Imam Ali bin Abi Talib (a).

Campaign against Bribery

According to Imam Ali, bribery brings destruction and drives one towards wrongdoing. This immoral phenomenon is engendered by government officials who deny people of their rights, thus compelling them to demand them by resorting to bribery.

Indeed, bribery does earn someone a privilege, but by trampling on the rights of other people. It is quite obvious that the gifts received by the government officials and functionaries are by virtue of their positions, otherwise, as ordinary citizens, they would have certainly not received them. Consequently, the one who has been offered the gift and has accepted it would naturally be obliged, at some point, to comply with the wishes of his benefactor, even if that meant snatching away the rights of other people⁴⁰.

During the period of his caliphate, one day Imam Ali (a) was brought a gift by an influential personality in the city of Kufah. The Imam recounts this incident in a sermon and says:

A man came to us in the night with some kind of food in a covered container, but [since he intended to bribe me with it,] I showed my aversion to it as though it was mixed with the saliva of a serpent or its vomit. I inquired whether it was a present, or zakat (poor-tax) or charity, as these [two] are forbidden for us – the members of the Prophet's family (s).

He said it was neither this nor that, but a gift [from him]. So I told him, 'May the mothers mourn you! Have you come to [bribe me and] mislead me through the religion of Allah? Have you gone mad? Or are you afflicted by the Jinn? Or you have lost your senses?

By Allah! If I were to be given the seven domains with all that is under their skies so that I may disobey Allah with regard an ant, snatching from it the husk of a barley grain, I would never do so. Verily, this world of yours is more worthless in my eyes than the chewed leaf in the mouth of a locust⁴¹.

The act of giving or receiving bribery is sharply opposed to philanthropic ideals and the dispensation of justice in the society. Imam Ali (a) openly stood against it lest it becomes instituted in the society such that right is seen as wrong, and wrong as right.

Conclusion

It becomes clear from the above discussion that in the words and practice of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib (a), governance over the people is not regarded as a privilege; rather, it is an opportunity to serve humankind.

According to the Imam, a good governor is someone who dedicates himself to the service of the people, attend to the affairs of the weak and the poor, and take appropriate measures to combat such social ailments as bribery, corruption, injustice and insecurity. In one word, he would direct all his efforts in protecting human dignity of his citizens, and in dispensing justice and humanity in the society.

The letter of Imam Ali (a) to Malik al-Ashtar on the matter of governance entails all the basic philanthropic ideals and principles necessary for the effective enforcement of justice in the society. He truly did not leave anything unsaid in this regard and has informed us of all that was necessary for us to know.

Therefore, by following these directives of Imam Ali (a), the Muslim community can lay the foundations of an ideal society, which would then serve as an exemplar for other communities around the world.

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