Awaaz

South Asian Journal of Arts
We are delighted to finally present Awaaz, South Asian Journal of Arts [Volume 1, Issue 1]! It has been quite a journey—from hope to reality, from submission to journal, from us to you. We could not be more excited about establishing this forum on campus and beginning another medium to reflect our evolving community.

Awaaz, meaning voice, was envisaged as a way of celebrating the uniqueness of South Asian culture while still honoring its differences. Each contribution has only reinforced this very idea. As a newly categorized student group on campus, Awaaz hopes to create a space for the Brown community to intellectually discuss South Asia and the modern South Asian experience through art, photography, poetry and prose. Particularly in the absence of a South Asian studies department here at Brown, there is a striking need for both a literary and artistic outlet within our community.

Awaaz seeks to celebrate pieces on the basis of interest, shared experience and concern, regardless of race, creed or origin. In this spirit, we proudly presents work from both South Asian and non-South Asian contributors alike.

Thank you so much to everyone who helped to make this publication possible, especially those who submitted. In the words of one of our writers, “the fact that you have the bravery, the strength of voice, to say something, is enough.”

Sincerely,

Jhale Ali ’08
Editor in Chief

Priyan Chandraratna ’08
Co-Editor

Komal Talati ‘08
Co-Editor
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cover</td>
<td>The Model Minority</td>
<td>Komal Talati ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>God’s Own Land</td>
<td>Jhale Ali ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Number 10 [from a series of poems]</td>
<td>Karina Varma ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I Could Spend the Rest of My Life Here</td>
<td>Vani Kilakkathi ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bazaar</td>
<td>Kam Sripada ’09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Tamilla Mamedova ’07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9 course meals reveal to much</td>
<td>Jhale Ali ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Excerpt from Untitled (Mumbai Portrait)</td>
<td>Andrew Marantz ’06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Serendipity</td>
<td>Sanaa Rahman ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Punda Milia</td>
<td>Jhale Ali ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Chickens</td>
<td>Kam Sripada ’09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ganga</td>
<td>Lana Zaman ’08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Gopi</td>
<td>Komal Talati ’08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*special thanks to*

Karina Varma ’08  
Metcalf Copy Center  
Chandraratna, Jewanjee & Talati Families
God’s Own Land
Jhale Ali ’08
Digital Photograph
Dear God

I
Am so homesick today I
Sat on desk with soles of my feet
Pressed against the edge drop and
Called my mother and sister.

They are in London, in white walled
Comfort, where wood floor bleats
At night, en route to kitchen for water,
Television noise and fresh fresh
Tomato and mozzarella salad on
Kitchen counter, almost always
Too much laundry all over the
Hamper, also below it some socks
That fell, and all the cleaning products
Stacked above the washing machine,
Lined up like reliable soldiers.
The white sunshine, shoes by the door.

We have a large coat stand near the door here
In Spain, screaming mountains and sea and
Yellow baked sun forbid their usage
And relegate them to hang for months,
Useless. I didn’t get up till ten thirty today,
And now I am on the phone waiting for
Silly jokes and Everything’s OK, Stop
Worrying from she who worries the most.
I could spend the rest of my life here. Picking (and eating) oranges off neighbors' fruit trees; making friendly conversation with bag boys at the local grocery store; driving up and down streets lined with palms and fruit trees; constantly searching for the horizon, only to be thwarted by the greenest mountains I've ever seen. Idyllic: the definition of a Californian existence.

I've learned to knit. There is a certain self-satisfaction in making things yourself, even if they're just slightly lumpy scarves. In these few days, I've seen a thousand china doll grandmothers while picking out yarn; I suspect they find refuge in discount craft stores. These tiny, translucent women make me think of my own grandmother, who never picked up a knitting needle despite hailing from a family of textile tycoons. I remember whenever I visited, she'd have a big tin of homemade gothuma halva ready for me. Even the last time, when her arthritis in her hands was so bad it made her cry on cold, damp mornings, she squared her tiny shoulders (at 4'6", she was, technically, a dwarf) and patiently squeezed every last drop of whey from the cheesecloth bag of wet wheat grounds. I feel guilty thinking about her, am ashamed that I neglected to reciprocate her love in those last few months because loving her was just too hard.

I hurt when I think about my mother. I ache every time someone talks about her, every time someone reminisces about "those days." I see my father smiling, alone, while they talk, and I feel myself being torn apart inside. I think about what I will do when he dies, my father whose mustache wiggles when he drinks coffee, who sleeps alone and will always sleep alone on the side of the bed previously occupied by his dead wife. Our love, like our relationship, is complicated, but that is what makes it unspeakably beautiful. If I try to explain it too much, it collapses on itself, capsizes against oceans and waves of Reason. I will say this: he is a Good Man.

My mother hovers over my shoulder. Each breath, each step, I stop and wonder: did she breathe this? Did she walk this? I see her as she was twenty years ago, round-faced, fair-skinned, and slender, wearing flowing gypsy skirts with the lingering scent of cumin and fennel seeds in the folds of fabric. I have inherited her moon face and skirts, her temper and temperament, her easy laugh. With each (re)introduction to an auntie or uncle from a dusty, distant past, the same comparisons are made and the same conclusion drawn: I am my mother's daughter. But not my mother.

Amma, are you happy with me? I always want to ask the shadow standing in the corner. I can't be you, can never be you – are you okay with that? I can almost hear her whisper back. The fact she can't respond doesn't stop me from talking to her – not out loud, not usually anyway. My one-way correspondences are strange, wordless affairs. The best I can explain it is this: whenever my heart swells to press against my ribs, whenever I'm sure I'll fly apart in a minute because I have that much inside me, whenever my experiences transcend feeble, man-made words, I siphon off some of this, this Excess, and send it to her. She accepts my offerings, and I know, somehow, she is grateful.

All this, all these words: I am dying of words. They spill out, and I catch them however I can: on the pages of notebooks, on the backs of directions, on scraps of napkins. I don't write for anyone; I guess, in a way, it doesn't matter. The fact that you have the bravery, the strength of voice, to say something, is enough.
India
Tamilla Mamedova ’07
Digital Photograph
He arrived late and almost didn’t hug while his collar rested flat against the cuff. He ordered pigeon breast and different experiences. I called the filet, looking for raspberries and dark chocolate. He said love happens when you know yourself. It wasn’t the problem of us, but me, rather. He asked why I was crying, though I wasn’t, and if I understood what he meant:

Different experiences, I called—looking for red raspberries and dark chocolate. He said love happens when you know yourself. I knew him, leaning against the wall, resting flat, trying to understand. Hands between hands, stopping to hug, embrace. How a man can unravel at the sound of breaks. He arrived out of absence to frustration and distances across the room covered in suitcases and thick oil smells.

He walked away unfinished, myself ready to sleep through resting flat, trying to understand why love only happens when you know yourself. Left wondering if answers lay flat under pigeon breast and newer experiences. I ask, why am I not crying and looking for raspberries in dark chocolate? And he said, it isn’t the problem of us, but me, rather.
Excerpt from Untitled (Mumbai Portrait)

He is a cartoon holy man. His eyes shiny, compact, lodged back in his skull like cargo his head’s carrying, two nuggets of onyx or two fossilized turds. Wrinkles everywhere; fierce brow, puckered mouth, dry hanging lips, chieftain hook nose; long straight hair, pepperwhite. First thing you learn in cliché class: everything august has a long white beard.

He shakes out a cigarette from a green soft pack, unfiltered, extends toward me. I shake my head, apologetic. A smoke is solidarity but also a day’s sore throat. Chai, he suggests. Sure, I can do chai.

Of course he wears a long flowing robe, of course. The caricature calls for extremes: long hair or shaved head, austere or adorned, white dress or black (he chooses black).

Tucked away colony south of the train station, a world that wouldn’t have existed if the cabbie hadn’t gotten lost. These things don’t happen. Your cab doesn’t follow the wrong Road #2 wrong way across town, you don’t get out to poke around aimless, museum of object impermanence. You don’t suck kabobs off newspaper shove off still as hungry and full, amble, stumble on a mosque its doors propped out to the traffic, eerie green lantern shadows on gold film thirty men prostrated against the western wall. You don’t stand outside listening in to the nothing but silentsmacking lips the creaks of bending knees, the flick of incense lighter at your shoulder the murmuring baby girl the blackcloth waves of women to your right, throttle motorbike behind. Certainly, no, you do not feel the tug on your pants of the (not that, no) crawling beggar. You don’t turn from the door of the mosque to a street-corner prophet in black robe smoking sitting quiet, a slinkback sufi Jimmy Dean. And if you do, supposing you do, he doesn’t crook his finger and shake out a cigarette without cracking a smile. These are myths, only what we want to—no one actually—And yet: cartoon holy man smoking, smug; passersby gawk at the pair, white kid and longbeard saddhu, and you two sit aloof angled out, pretend not to notice. He gestures to the mosque and gestures to the sky and gestures to you, bobbing hook finger, you, mosque, sky, mosque raised eyebrows? A yes or no question and you decide no: no, I’m not a Muslim. Cartoon nods, not disappointed, tells his two friends. Nice that he asked; nice that most of the Muslims you meet eventually want to talk about Osama but first want to talk about God.

You are to his right, his friends to his left. First friend is a guy who could have been any other guy: cropped beard, parted hair, a sweater for crissakes. Far-left friend, as if to compensate, a cartoon of a cartoon: a kiddie drawing in 64-crayon color and pulsing imagination. Silky ballooning pajama pants with big stripes running down pink purple and black, and even a sort of vest, tall green fez with tiny gold sequins and a henna-dyed thick beard, kohl black prayer gunk around his eyes. A big blustering clown of Islam pulling circumcised rabbits out of hats, sawing hijab’d women in half, turning wine into water.

The camera is fun as long as the battery lasts. Even Cartoon gets in on it, rocks forward from his seat, wants one of me and him, now just him, now a close-up, now take the top spires of the mosque, now his foot in your chappal. The camera back and forth between hands and laughing and a beggar comes by (a different one,
not crawling, jesus) and plants himself at your right foot and shows his wound. A little wound, the knuckle of his thumb. Swollen and full of pus and you can’t tell if the thumb keeps going normal above the scab or if it’s wrong at the top because you don’t want to look. Maybe he wants compassion, but compassion is not pity and not a gag reflex. The scab makes you sick, not for him or for you but just makes you turn away. Where compassion doesn’t make you turn but dive in, is your diving in, is the slice of Venn circles interlocking. Shame or pity at this man’s white bloodclot thumb is disunion. This you think later, when you have time to think.

A boy brings more chais and two waters. You give your water to the beggar; can’t drink it anyway. Tip your chai toward Cartoon and he waves it into your mouth: not hot or sweet and too much cardamom but better than an unfiltered cigarette.

Then Cartoon starts in on the beggar, or the beggar on him. They start in, having words. You don’t know Marathi, they seem angry but maybe it’s one of those things. They’re shouting about something to do with you, because there’s nothing else around out of the ordinary and now they’re pointing at you without eye contact. You’re in the middle up against a wall, bigger than both of them if it comes to that but you don’t want anything to do with that thumb. Come on guys, not this, argue over cricket or a woman.

Beggar says Mai neihe paise mejaha pointing at you rolling his eyes.

Cartoon booms Sath bhoma dhat puffing himself up big and mean.

Beggar whines Kab ne jaiye photo me kaina.

You don’t see what the photos have to do with it.

Then Cartoon is up in a cloud of robe and shockingly taller than the beggar and smacks the beggar open-handed on the jaw. And the crowd (there’s always a crowd) watches Cartoon smack the beggar and he has impunity. Clown pants friend is on his feet and shoots you a wild look like What’s this all about? and you shot him one back I’m the only one as clueless as you. Then the beggar tries pushing (afraid to hit the babu outright) and they start scuffling and ruffling collars for two seconds before four men break it up, pat them both on the shoulder. Nobody even looks Cartoon Babu in the eye, he’s that big, he just looks pissed off and righteous in the middle of the street. Sits back down.

The four breaker-uppers break off but the beggar stays, head turned down the street but feet in place. You are put off balance, out of predictions, you want always to see what happens next but want most of all not to cause any more conflict. Cartoon isn’t communicating anymore, he is fuming trying to be dignified, and the two friends look ahead like nothing happened. Look ahead. Prayer is over, the energy uncoils loose and slow in the street.

You should leave. You don’t know if money would defuse or inflame. You toss Cartoon a five coin for the chai, he doesn’t look, turns around hands it to the beggar. All right, Cartoon, it’s your money. You stand up on the edge of the curb, wonder if you look dignified. While you drop your first step into the street the beggar brushes against your arm and says “blood” and sure enough his white craggy gash is bright red.

Andrew Marantz ’08
The sand is so hot that one cannot stand on it for more than five seconds without having it scorch the soles of your feet and make you jump in search of cooler ground. The rest of the family has retired to the shade of the beach-house’s veranda for sandwiches but my sister decides to go for a walk and I am allowed to follow. Through the mirage of heat that rises from the deserted beach, we are two brown bodies in the yellow dunes by the blue. The top layer of the sand is caked from hardening under the short, intense afternoon sun and cracks as we walk over it, my four-year-old feet much smaller than hers, ten years separating our four inches. We stop in the shade of a dune and she sits down to stare and think and I begin to dig. I dig because I think I am getting somewhere, ideas of untouched patches of land leading to treasure filling my mind. I want so badly to find something, anything—a coin, a bone, a forgotten scroll, China. But my red plastic spade instead strikes something else. The sand is quickly dusted away and from the significant crater, I pull out my conquest, my wondrous booty to show my sister. It is the most beautiful green paintbrush (covered in the remains of white paint) that I have ever seen. My sister turns and for a moment emerges from her teenage daydream long enough to say one word, the first “big one” I ever learned, serendipity.
Chickens
Kam Sripada ‘09
Digital Photograph
She swayed her arms ever so slowly, her hands tracing the intricate bends and curves of the river. She swung a graceful arm, her hand in moon position. Her pointy fingers were painted red, and her eyes were outlined in sharp black lines. Guruji said it would make her look fiery. In truth, the red looked almost misplaced. As Dashahara slowly turned, her wavy hair fell loose from its bun. Her whole body resembled a river; the black waves of hair, the roundness of hips the arches of feet.

At the end of her dance, Ammu and Papa would clap. Guruji would scold the girl for her lack of solidity. Dashahara would laugh. No matter how she tried, she could not make her movements sharp. Her body flowed like liquid, spilling from one form to another. She could never resemble the anger of Kali or the vengeance of Shiva. So she danced the movements of Ganga, playfully bending and winding in the smoothness of curves.

When Ganga transcended from the heavens she landed in Shiva’s hair. Her playful intention had been to overwhelm him with the force of her waves. So knowing, Shiva affectionately trapped her in his hair before she had any chance for mischief. There she stayed for thousands of years, ruffling her fingers through his hairs and whispering secrets into his ears. Shiva would tell her to be still, feigning anger. He would threaten her with serpents and his wide, angry eyes. She would clap her hands and laugh and swim among the strands, cooling his thoughts.

At night when he slept she would bless him with good dreams, and he would wake up to the sound of her sweeping song. The two of them danced in this playful paradise, they knew could not last. And after one hundred divine years, she shot from his head like a spring. She flowed down to the earth, forever leaving the crescent moon glowing upon his head in her place.

Dashahara would walk along the pebbly bank of Ganga, her tough feet scraping against the rocks. Occasionally, when no one was looking, she would unwrap her blue cotton sari. Leaving it in a heap on the rocks, she would plunge into the river in just a petticoat and blouse. She would swim in the cool waters, her curves blending into the ripples. Sometimes Harilal, the shepherd’s son, would watch her in secret. Though she never said so, Dashahara knew he was there. At the beginning she was merely indifferent to his presence, but now she had made it her secret mission to torture the boy. But Ganga had a secret too, and it was this; they had both been there once before, Dashahara as a catfish, and Harilal as a monkey.

When she came up from the water Dashahara’s petticoat stuck to her thick dancing legs. Harilal would hide in the trees as she wrung the water from her hair. She would find a sunny spot far enough from her path so no one would find her and dance by the river until her clothes dried.

Once in a while Ammu would catch her coming home with wet hair. Slapping her, she would say, “What would I do if someone saw you? You will put your father and me to shame, standing outside in nothing but your undergarments.” She would threaten to get Dashahara married immediately. This always scared the girl, but never enough to keep her from swimming in the river.

Ganga found her place on earth, expelled from the heavens. She shamelessly stretched out her body and watched the villagers around her. Ammu, they called her, and treated
her as their mother. They worshipped her and drank of her blood to purify their souls, believing it redeemed them of all sins. Mothers would bring their laundry, and wading into her waters, they would let Ganga wash it clean. And at night the Nagin would slither upon the banks and transform into beautiful and mysterious women. Their long limbs glid with a serpent’s charm, wrapping around the bodies of men in circle after circle.

Ganga saw it all; generation after generation of priests and children and poets and whores. She loved best the dancers. The girls and women came to her jingling with ghunroo and mandiras. They would count out rhythms and steps to the steady pace of the river. Sometimes they leapt in and danced with Ganga. She would teach them the bends and waves of heaven. Even the fish would stop to watch the dancers. On one such day Harilal crept up in the trees to watch the girls swimming in the river. This was before he ever knew Dashahara, and before he had lost his tail. He watched with impenetrable focus. A girl was flapping and flailing in the current. Clearly she could not swim. She flung her arms about in search of something to hang onto, and suddenly Harilal saw her glide unto the shore. He wondered what had pulled her and he swung down from the tree. The branch snapped and he fell with a thud on the sandy shore before a silvery blue catfish. The fish was now struggling in the girl’s hand. Harilal lifted her by the tail and tossed her back into the river. The fish shot a happy glance at the girl she’d rescued and the monkey who’d rescued her, and she wiggled delightedly back into the waves.

Dashahara strolled along the sandy beach toward the city. Ammu had sent her into town to get groceries. She trudged slowly and watched the river get filthier and filthier the further she walked. In the crystal blue, she began to see old newspapers, bags of potato chips, and suds of laundry detergent. Occasionally an uncremated body would float by, along the surface of Ganga’s skin. This always upset the girl, but there was nothing to be done. A group of city women walked down the steps of the temple. Tikkas on their foreheads and alta on their feet, they waded into Ganga waste deep in water. They clung tightly to their saris to keep them from unraveling and drizzled water over their heads, worshipping the mother and praying for sons.

“How much,” Dashahara asked the vegetable vendor, pointing to the ladies fingers.

“Twenty rupees for the bundle,” he replied, tipping the ashes of his cigarette onto the ground.

“Ten,” she said.

“Fifteen,” he replied.

“Done.”

The man pulled out a blue book of receipts. Taking a pen in his hand, he threw his cigarette stub into the river. Dashahara put down the ladies’ fingers and walked away without a word.

The woman swaddled her baby in layer after layer of fabric. Ganga watched silently. It was a scene she’d witnessed all too many times. The baby girl began to cry. The woman stuffed a wad of fabric in her mouth, and she was silent. Ganga watched the woman’s black shawl fall away from her face. She was crying more than the baby. Ganga recognized her, as a dancer; one whom she had danced with before. Guruji knelt down on the rocks at the edge of the ravine. Laying the baby out across her forearms, she whispered a prayer and let go. Ganga caught her. Even in babyhood, she could see it was the body of a dancer. She danced with the baby softly at first, and watched the mother pull her shawl over her head in silent mourning. “I promise”, Ganga whispered. “I will bring this baby back to you.” And with those words she swallowed the child in the waves and curves of her body.

A couple of construction workers walked up to the edge of the ravine with a wheelbarrow full of filth. They threw the industrial waste into Ganga’s womb. Dashahara watched from a distance in disgust. She
knew Ammu would be angry when she came home without the ladies fingers, but she couldn’t bring herself to reenter the city. She looked at the sun. Guruji would be coming soon. Today she would teach her another shlok of Ganga. The girl straightened her sari and began walking home.

When she arrived Guruji was already sitting on the verandah. Dashahara tied the ghungroo around her ankles and began stepping as Guruji counted rhythms with her mandiras.

“So, I saw that boy on my way here. He was hiding in the trees as if he were waiting for someone,” Guruji said with a grin.

“Who are you talking about?” Dashahara replied, blushing.

“Oh, you don’t know?” she raised her eyebrows. “The shepherd’s son, Harilal.”

“Oh,” Dashahara said, tipping her head so that her hair fell down and covered her smile. Guruji pretended not to notice. She watched Dashahara’s fluid arms flow from gesture to gesture. She stood in tribhangi, one hand making a lotus, the other pointing to her navel. Never had she attained such perfect harmony in her motions.

Dashara wrung out her hair and bathed in the sun’s glow. She closed her eyes and spread out her arms to take in the warmth. She promised herself this would be the last time she swam with Ganga in her undergarments. Wishing not to be disturbed, she told Ammu she was going into town for the carnival. The city would be so crowded no one would ever remember whether she was there or not.

Ever since Dashahara’s last lesson with Guruji, the dance had claimed her soul, and denied her her girlish whims. Finally recognizing the curves of her body, she gained a new understanding of Ganga. Yet with it she realized she could not depend so heavily on her. These thoughts ran through Dashahara’s mind as she tipped her head to let the sun dry her black river of hair. She felt a shadow fall across her back. Her eyes shot open. It was too late. She was lying on her back in the sand, the filthy construction worker’s hand clutching a fistful of her hair. Unlike the sweeper, his eyes possessed no softness.

“Harilal!” she screamed. But this time he was not there to save her. She screamed again, knowing it was useless. She had taken extra measure to ensure that no one knew where she was. Pinned to the ground, her eyes widened in horror.

He drank of Ganga’s water afterwards; Brimming with shit and decaying flesh and the industrial waste he had cast upon her but a day before.

Once upon a time, before she had taken on her current
form, and before she ever set foot on the earth, Ganga had been engaged. Not by choice. She had been kidnapped by the gods and forced into an engagement with Lord Shiva. Despite her love for him, she did not like being forced into such circumstances. So on her wedding day, mischievous as she was, she hid herself in a glass bottle. The gods looked in every corner of every room in search of her. When they found her curled up in the bottle her playful games were not well received. Bhagiratha set a curse upon her to turn her into water. He banished her from the heavens and sent her down to earth. Yet his intentions were not entirely malicious. The truth was that he needed her. He needed her to fill the voids of the earth. So when Shiva released her, Ganga flowed into every riverbed, every waterless stream, every empty sea, and every hollow ocean. Mother of all waters she sustained life, and with her playful nature, soothed the earth.

“I never told you this, but I had a daughter once,” Guruji whispered as Dashahara cried into her arms.

“When?” Dashahara asked, her eyes widening. Guruji stared into the blank sky.

“It was about a year before you were born.” They held each other silently for a minute. “She had this beautiful, wavy hair.” Guruji whispered so as not to wake up her husband inside. “We couldn’t afford to raise a girl. He would never have forgiven me for it, so I gave her to the river. I never had another child after that.” Guruji stroked Dashahara’s wavy hair and pulled her close. “What life is this, where we worship the mother, and throw our daughters into the river like ashes.”

Dashahara walked up to the ravine. It was raining. She could hardly feel the cold. She watched the raindrops slam their tiny bodies into Ganga’s glassy surface. The sun was just beginning to rise. Her parents must have been worried. It was better they never knew. Her body ached with filth. She looked into Ganga’s womb with all the pain and power and secrets it held. She thought of Harilal, with his longing eyes and monkey-like smile. She took a deep breath and leapt in. Dancing in immense waves, Ganga embraced her and sucked the breath from her lips. When Dashahara had but one breath left, Ganga promised to bring her back in a better place. And as she plunge beneath the layers of soap scum and papers and industrial chemicals, she could see Ganga’s playful arms beckoning her to a memory of heaven.
Gopi
Komal Talati ‘08
Graphite, Colored Pencil & Ink
If you would like to be a part of Awaaz or would like to submit pieces for our next publication, please contact

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