



MARDALA AS A SYMBOL OF ODISHAN MUSICAL IDENTITY: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

The Mardala is one of the most distinctive percussion instruments of Odisha and serves as a significant symbol of the state's musical and cultural identity. Deeply rooted in temple traditions, classical music, and devotional practices, the instrument has evolved over centuries while maintaining its unique rhythmic and aesthetic character. This study examines the historical development of the Mardala and its emergence as an emblem of Odishan musical identity. Drawing upon historical records, Sanskrit musicological treatises, temple sculptures, literary sources, and contemporary scholarly works, the article explores the instrument's association with the Jagannath cult, Odissi music, and Odissi dance. It further analyses the role of the Mardala in preserving indigenous musical traditions through the guru–shishya paramparā and its contribution to the cultural continuity of Odisha. The study argues that the Mardala is not merely a percussion instrument but a cultural symbol representing the historical legacy, artistic excellence, and collective identity of the people of Odisha. By examining its historical evolution and contemporary relevance, the paper highlights the need for continued preservation, documentation, and promotion of this invaluable component of India's intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Mardala, Odisha, Musical Identity, Odissi Music, Odissi Dance, Jagannath Tradition, Ethnomusicology, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Percussion, Performing Arts

1. Introduction

Music has always been an essential component of Odisha's cultural heritage, reflecting the state's religious traditions, artistic achievements, and social values. Over centuries, Odisha has developed a distinctive musical tradition that integrates classical music, temple rituals, devotional practices, and folk performances into a unified cultural expression. Among the numerous musical instruments associated with this rich tradition, the Mardala occupies a unique position as the principal percussion instrument of Odissi music and dance. Its rhythmic sophistication, tonal richness, and close association with Odisha's classical performing arts have established it as one of the most recognizable symbols of the state's musical identity.

The historical evolution of the Mardala is closely connected with the development of Odisha's temple culture, particularly the Jagannath tradition at Puri. Archaeological evidence, temple sculptures, Sanskrit musicological texts, and medieval Odia literature indicate that barrel-shaped percussion instruments have been an integral part of Odisha's artistic life since ancient times. Over successive centuries, the Mardala acquired a distinctive regional identity through its unique construction, rhythmic vocabulary, and performance techniques. Unlike similar percussion instruments found elsewhere in India, the Mardala developed within the specific cultural environment of Odisha, reflecting local aesthetic values and musical practices.

The instrument has played a central role in the evolution of Odissi music and dance. It provides not only rhythmic accompaniment but also enhances the expressive quality of performances through intricate *bols*, improvisations, and dynamic interaction with dancers and vocalists. The preservation of its performance tradition through the *guru–shishya paramparā* has ensured the continuity of both technical knowledge and cultural values across generations.

Consequently, the Mardala represents a living tradition that embodies the historical experiences, religious beliefs, and artistic creativity of Odishan society.

Despite its immense significance, the Mardala has often been studied primarily as an accompanying instrument within Odissi music, while its broader historical and cultural importance has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Understanding the Mardala as a symbol of Odishan musical identity requires an examination of its historical development, cultural functions, and enduring relationship with the social and religious life of the region.

This study adopts a historical approach to investigate the evolution of the Mardala and its contribution to the formation of Odisha's musical identity. By analysing literary sources, historical records, temple traditions, and contemporary scholarship, the paper demonstrates that the Mardala is not merely a musical instrument but a powerful cultural symbol that reflects the continuity, resilience, and artistic heritage of Odisha. Its enduring presence in ritual practices, classical performances, and cultural institutions continues to reinforce its status as one of the defining emblems of Odisha's musical tradition.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, historical, and descriptive research methodology to examine the Mardala as a symbol of Odishan musical identity. Since the study seeks to understand the historical evolution, cultural significance, and musical role of the instrument, it employs an interdisciplinary approach by integrating perspectives from history, musicology, cultural studies, and ethnomusicology. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the Mardala within the broader context of Odisha's musical and cultural traditions.

The research is primarily based on secondary sources of data. Books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers, doctoral theses, archival records, and publications on Indian music, Odissi music, ethnomusicology, and the cultural history of Odisha have been systematically reviewed. Classical Sanskrit treatises such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Saṅgīta Ratnākara*, along with medieval Odia literary works, temple chronicles, and historical documents, have been consulted to trace the origin and historical development of the Mardala. In addition, sculptural representations of musicians found in the temples of Bhubaneswar, Puri, and Konark have been examined as important iconographic evidence for understanding the antiquity and continuity of percussion traditions in Odisha.

A historical method has been employed to reconstruct the chronological development of the Mardala and its association with temple rituals, royal patronage, Odissi music, and Odissi dance. The study also uses a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the instrument's role in shaping the musical identity of Odisha. Particular emphasis is placed on its relationship with the Jagannath tradition, the *guru-shishya paramparā*, and the preservation of indigenous musical knowledge across generations.

The collected information has been critically analysed through comparison and interpretation of historical, literary, and musicological sources. The study focuses not only on the structural and musical characteristics of the Mardala but also on its cultural symbolism, performance practices, and contribution to the formation of Odishan musical identity. By correlating historical evidence with contemporary musical traditions, the research highlights the continuity and transformation of the instrument across different historical periods.

To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the findings, information from multiple scholarly sources has been cross-verified. The interpretation of data is guided by principles of historical inquiry and ethnomusicological analysis, enabling the study to explore the interrelationship between music, culture, religion, and society. This multidisciplinary methodology provides a holistic understanding of the Mardala as both a musical instrument and a significant symbol of Odisha's cultural heritage.

Historical Evolution of the Mardala

The historical evolution of the Mardala reflects the rich cultural and musical heritage of Odisha. As one of the oldest indigenous percussion instruments of the region, the Mardala has developed through centuries of religious practice, artistic innovation, and social transformation. Its journey from an ancient membranophone associated with temple rituals to the principal percussion instrument of Odissi music and dance illustrates the continuity and resilience of Odisha's musical tradition.

The origins of the Mardala may be traced to the broader Indian tradition of barrel-shaped percussion instruments described in ancient Sanskrit musicological texts. Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* discusses the classification of

Avanaddha Vadyas (membranophones) and establishes the theoretical principles of rhythm, percussion, and performance that later influenced regional musical traditions. Although the text primarily refers to the *Mrdaṅga* and *Puṣkara*, scholars believe that these early percussion traditions provided the conceptual foundation for the development of the Mardala in eastern India. Śārṅgadeva's *Saṅgīta Ratnākara* further elaborates on rhythmic systems, performance techniques, and percussion practices that remained influential in the evolution of Odisha's classical music.

Archaeological and iconographic evidence provides substantial support for the antiquity of the Mardala tradition. Temple sculptures dating from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE depict musicians performing with barrel-shaped drums closely resembling the modern Mardala. These carvings are prominently found in the Mukteswara, Rajarani, Lingaraja, Brahmeswara, and Konark Sun Temples, where percussionists accompany dancers, vocalists, and ritual performances. Such visual evidence suggests that percussion music occupied an important position in the religious and artistic life of ancient Odisha and that instruments similar to the Mardala were already well established.

The emergence of the Jagannath Temple at Puri as a major centre of religious and cultural activity significantly influenced the development of the Mardala. Temple rituals required a highly organized musical tradition in which vocal music, dance, and percussion formed integral components of daily worship and annual festivals. The Mardala gradually became an indispensable instrument for accompanying devotional songs, ceremonial dances, and sacred processions. Through continuous participation in temple rituals, it acquired not only artistic importance but also deep spiritual and symbolic significance within Odishan society.

During the medieval period, the flourishing of devotional literature and Vaishnava religious movements further strengthened the position of the Mardala. The performance of Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda* in the Jagannath Temple relied upon refined systems of vocal and rhythmic accompaniment, contributing to the development of sophisticated percussion techniques. Likewise, the devotional compositions of the Panchasakha poets and other medieval Odia literary traditions frequently describe music and dance as essential forms of religious expression, indicating the widespread use of percussion instruments in spiritual and community life.

The Mahari and Gotipua traditions played a crucial role in preserving and refining the performance practice of the Mardala. Maharis, the temple dancers dedicated to Lord Jagannath, performed sacred dances accompanied by musicians in which the Mardala served as the principal rhythmic instrument. Following the gradual decline of the Mahari system, the Gotipua tradition inherited many elements of temple dance and music, ensuring the continuity of Mardala performance. The rhythmic repertoire developed within these traditions later became the foundation of modern Odissi dance.

Royal patronage also contributed significantly to the historical development of the instrument. The Eastern Ganga and Gajapati rulers encouraged the growth of music, dance, literature, and temple arts throughout Odisha. Court musicians and temple artists were supported in developing sophisticated rhythmic compositions and performance practices. Under such patronage, the Mardala evolved into an instrument of both ritual importance and artistic excellence, becoming closely associated with Odisha's classical musical identity.

The colonial period introduced significant challenges to traditional performing arts. The decline of royal courts, reduced temple patronage, and changing socio-political conditions adversely affected hereditary communities of musicians. Nevertheless, the Mardala tradition survived through the commitment of temple performers, village musicians, and dedicated gurus who continued to transmit their knowledge through the *guru-shishya paramparā*. This uninterrupted oral tradition preserved the instrument's distinctive rhythmic language and performance techniques during a period of cultural transition.

A major turning point occurred in the twentieth century with the revival of Odissi dance as one of India's recognized classical dance forms. Eminent gurus, scholars, and musicians reconstructed the dance tradition by drawing upon temple practices, Gotipua performances, and historical sources. During this cultural renaissance, the Mardala emerged as the principal percussion instrument of Odissi, receiving renewed attention in performance, pedagogy, and academic research. Standardized teaching methods, notation systems, and institutional training further strengthened its position within the classical music tradition of Odisha.

In the contemporary era, the Mardala has achieved national and international recognition through concerts, cultural festivals, academic institutions, and digital media. Universities, music colleges, and cultural organizations have incorporated formal training programmes that facilitate the preservation and dissemination of traditional knowledge.

Modern performers continue to uphold classical techniques while exploring innovative concert presentations and collaborative performances, thereby expanding the instrument's artistic possibilities without compromising its traditional essence.

The historical evolution of the Mardala demonstrates a remarkable continuity of musical practice across changing historical periods. From its roots in ancient Indian percussion traditions and its development within Odisha's temple culture to its present role in classical performance and global cultural exchange, the instrument has consistently represented the artistic spirit of the region. Its enduring presence reflects the resilience of Odisha's musical heritage and reinforces the Mardala's status as a defining symbol of Odishan cultural identity.

Mardala in Temple Culture and Jagannath Tradition

The Mardala occupies a central position in the temple culture of Odisha, particularly within the religious traditions of the Jagannath Temple at Puri. For centuries, music has been regarded as an indispensable component of temple worship, where devotional singing, instrumental performance, and dance collectively express reverence toward the deity. Among the various musical instruments employed in these sacred performances, the Mardala has emerged as the principal percussion instrument, providing rhythmic structure and enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of ritual observances. Its enduring association with temple worship has made it not only a musical instrument but also a sacred symbol of Odisha's religious and cultural heritage.

The Jagannath Temple has historically functioned as one of the foremost centres for the preservation and development of Odisha's performing arts. Daily rituals (*nitis*), seasonal festivals, and grand ceremonies such as the Ratha Yatra, Snana Yatra, Chandan Yatra, and Jhulan Yatra are accompanied by devotional music in which rhythmic accompaniment plays a vital role. The Mardala provides the rhythmic foundation for vocal performances, ceremonial processions, and ritual dances, creating an atmosphere of devotion and spiritual celebration. Through its continuous presence in temple worship, the instrument has become deeply integrated into the religious life of the Jagannath tradition.

The ritual performance of Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda further strengthened the relationship between the Mardala and the Jagannath cult. The lyrical compositions of the Gīta Govinda, which describe the divine love of Radha and Krishna, have been traditionally rendered as part of the temple's daily rituals. The Mardala accompanies these devotional songs with intricate rhythmic patterns that enhance their emotional depth and aesthetic beauty. The coordination between vocalists, percussionists, and dancers demonstrates the holistic nature of Odisha's temple music, where rhythm, melody, poetry, and devotion are inseparably connected.

The historical Mahari tradition also contributed significantly to the sacred status of the Mardala. Maharis, the female temple dancers dedicated to Lord Jagannath, performed ritual dances within the temple precincts as an offering to the deity. Their performances were accompanied by musicians, with the Mardala serving as the principal rhythmic instrument. The drummer was required to possess not only technical expertise but also a thorough understanding of devotional aesthetics and ritual discipline. Through these performances, the Mardala became an integral part of the ceremonial expression of faith, reinforcing its importance within the temple tradition.

Following the gradual decline of the Mahari institution, the Gotipua tradition assumed a crucial role in preserving many aspects of Odisha's temple music and dance. Young male dancers continued to perform devotional repertoire outside the temple environment while maintaining the rhythmic conventions inherited from earlier traditions. The Mardala remained central to these performances, ensuring the continuity of its repertoire and performance techniques. Many rhythmic compositions (*bols*), *ukutas*, and accompaniment patterns used in contemporary Odissi dance have their roots in these temple-based traditions.

The Mardala also holds symbolic significance within the philosophy of Jagannath worship. In Odishan religious thought, rhythm represents order, harmony, and the cyclical nature of existence. The resonant sound of the Mardala is believed to enhance the sanctity of ritual performance and create a spiritual environment conducive to devotion. Its rhythmic vibrations accompany acts of worship, festivals, and ceremonial processions, reflecting the belief that music is a sacred offering capable of connecting devotees with the divine. Thus, the instrument serves both aesthetic and spiritual functions within temple culture.

The preservation of Mardala performance within the Jagannath tradition has largely depended upon hereditary musicians and the *guru-shishya paramparā*. Temple percussionists have traditionally transmitted their knowledge

orally, preserving intricate rhythmic compositions, performance conventions, and ritual practices across generations. This continuity has enabled the Mardala to retain its authentic character despite changing historical and social conditions. The close relationship between hereditary musicians, temple institutions, and religious festivals has ensured the survival of a highly specialized percussion tradition unique to Odisha.

In the modern era, the influence of the Jagannath tradition continues to shape Mardala performance both within and beyond the temple. Rhythmic compositions originating in temple rituals are now widely performed in Odissi concerts, music academies, and cultural festivals across India and abroad. Institutions dedicated to Odissi music have incorporated these traditional patterns into formal curricula, enabling students to appreciate the spiritual and historical foundations of the instrument alongside its technical aspects. This process has strengthened the connection between classical performance and Odisha's temple heritage.

The enduring association of the Mardala with the Jagannath Temple demonstrates that the instrument is far more than an accompaniment to music and dance. It is a living embodiment of Odisha's devotional traditions, ritual practices, and artistic excellence. Its continued use in temple ceremonies and classical performances reflects the seamless integration of religion, music, and cultural identity that has characterized Odishan civilization for centuries. Consequently, the Mardala remains one of the most significant symbols of the sacred musical heritage of Odisha, linking the spiritual traditions of the past with the cultural aspirations of the present.

3. Mardala and the Development of Odissi Music and Dance

The evolution of Odissi music and dance is closely intertwined with the development of the Mardala, which serves as the principal percussion instrument of the tradition. While melody and lyrical expression constitute the emotional core of Odissi, the Mardala provides the rhythmic framework that shapes the structure, tempo, and expressive flow of a performance. Over time, the instrument has become indispensable to the aesthetic identity of Odissi, contributing significantly to its recognition as one of India's classical performing arts.

The formative stages of Odissi were deeply influenced by temple-based performance traditions, particularly those of the Maharis and later the Gotipuas. Within these traditions, the Mardala functioned as more than a time-keeping instrument; it guided the movements of dancers, marked transitions between performance segments, and reinforced the expressive quality of devotional presentations. As these traditions gradually evolved into the modern classical form of Odissi, the rhythmic vocabulary of the Mardala was refined and systematically incorporated into the dance repertoire.

A defining feature of the Mardala in Odissi is its ability to establish a rhythmic dialogue with the dancer. The percussionist responds to intricate footwork, body movements, and expressive gestures through carefully executed rhythmic phrases. This interaction creates a dynamic relationship between movement and sound, allowing rhythm to function as an expressive language rather than merely a measure of time. Such coordination enhances the aesthetic appeal of the performance and reflects the integrated nature of music and dance in the Odissi tradition.

The Mardala plays a particularly important role in the execution of *nritta*, the pure dance component of Odissi. During these sequences, complex rhythmic patterns, tempo variations, and improvisatory passages highlight the technical skill of both the percussionist and the dancer. In expressive sections (*abhinaya*), however, the instrument adopts a more restrained approach, providing subtle rhythmic support that complements the emotional content of the accompanying poetry. This versatility enables the Mardala to adapt to different artistic requirements while maintaining the overall coherence of the performance.

The codification of Odissi during the twentieth-century revival further elevated the status of the Mardala. As scholars and gurus reconstructed the classical repertoire from temple traditions, sculptural evidence, and surviving performance practices, they recognized the instrument as essential to preserving the authentic rhythmic character of Odissi. Standardized compositions, pedagogical methods, and performance conventions were developed, allowing systematic training in Mardala accompaniment alongside vocal music and dance.

Several distinguished Mardala exponents made lasting contributions to the growth of Odissi music by composing new rhythmic sequences, refining accompaniment techniques, and establishing structured teaching methods. Their efforts transformed the instrument from a traditional accompaniment into an independent field of scholarly and artistic study. Today, Mardala training forms an integral part of music and dance institutions across Odisha, ensuring the continuity of its rich rhythmic tradition.

In contemporary performances, the Mardala continues to play a central role in solo recitals, group choreographies, dance dramas, and experimental productions. While remaining rooted in classical conventions, modern performers have expanded its artistic possibilities through collaborations with other musical traditions and innovative concert presentations. These developments have broadened the instrument's reach without diminishing its traditional identity.

The contribution of the Mardala to Odissi extends beyond performance practice. It has helped shape the rhythmic aesthetics, pedagogical traditions, and artistic philosophy of the classical form. By integrating technical precision with expressive sensitivity, the instrument has become an indispensable medium through which the distinctive character of Odissi music and dance is articulated. Its enduring presence continues to strengthen the cultural identity of Odisha and affirms its place at the heart of the state's classical performing arts.

Mardala as a Marker of Odishan Cultural Identity

The Mardala is widely recognized as one of the most enduring symbols of Odisha's cultural identity. Its significance extends beyond the domain of music, representing the historical continuity, artistic traditions, and collective memory of the people of the state. As the principal percussion instrument of Odissi music and dance, the Mardala has become an important cultural emblem that reflects Odisha's distinctive contribution to the performing arts of India. Its presence in religious ceremonies, classical performances, educational institutions, and cultural festivals has reinforced its status as a marker of regional identity.

The cultural identity of the Mardala has been shaped by its deep association with Odisha's historical institutions and traditions. For centuries, the instrument has been linked with the Jagannath Temple, where music and rhythm form an essential part of ritual worship and devotional expression. This sacred association has elevated the Mardala beyond its functional role as a percussion instrument, transforming it into a symbol of spiritual heritage and cultural continuity. The rhythmic traditions preserved within the temple environment have subsequently influenced the broader musical culture of the region, strengthening the instrument's connection with Odishan identity.

The emergence of Odissi as a classical dance form further enhanced the symbolic importance of the Mardala. As the primary percussion instrument accompanying Odissi performances, it became closely identified with the state's artistic heritage. Whether performed on national stages or international platforms, the sound of the Mardala immediately evokes the aesthetic traditions of Odisha. Its distinctive rhythmic language differentiates Odissi from other Indian classical dance and music traditions, thereby reinforcing the uniqueness of Odisha's cultural expression.

The Mardala also serves as a repository of indigenous knowledge and traditional craftsmanship. The process of constructing the instrument requires specialized skills that have been preserved by local artisans over generations. Likewise, its performance tradition has been transmitted through the *guru-shishya paramparā*, ensuring the continuity of rhythmic compositions, performance practices, and artistic values. These systems of craftsmanship and oral transmission represent important aspects of Odisha's intangible cultural heritage, with the Mardala functioning as a tangible expression of this living tradition.

Beyond the classical stage, the Mardala contributes to cultural identity through its participation in festivals, religious celebrations, cultural exhibitions, and educational programmes. Performances during state-sponsored cultural events, temple festivals, and heritage festivals present the instrument as a representative symbol of Odisha's artistic legacy. Music institutions, universities, and cultural academies have incorporated Mardala training into their curricula, enabling younger generations to engage with their cultural heritage while ensuring the continuity of the tradition.

The instrument has also become an important medium for representing Odisha in national and international cultural exchanges. Performances by Odissi musicians and dancers at festivals, academic conferences, and cultural missions have introduced global audiences to the unique rhythmic traditions of the state. Through these interactions, the Mardala functions as a cultural ambassador, promoting awareness of Odisha's history, music, and artistic achievements beyond regional boundaries. Such recognition has strengthened both regional pride and international appreciation of Odishan culture.

In the contemporary era, the Mardala continues to adapt to changing cultural contexts without losing its traditional character. Digital documentation, archival recordings, research publications, and online teaching platforms have expanded opportunities for learning and dissemination. At the same time, efforts by cultural organizations and government institutions to promote Odisha's performing arts have further reinforced the visibility of the instrument.

These initiatives demonstrate that cultural identity is not static but evolves through preservation, education, and creative engagement with changing social realities.

Despite its prominent status, sustaining the Mardala as a symbol of Odishan cultural identity requires continued support. The declining number of hereditary practitioners, limited documentation of traditional compositions, and changing cultural preferences among younger generations present significant challenges. Addressing these concerns through systematic research, institutional patronage, financial assistance to artisans and performers, and greater public awareness will help ensure the continued vitality of the tradition.

Thus, the Mardala stands as more than a musical instrument; it is a cultural icon that embodies the historical experiences, religious traditions, artistic excellence, and collective aspirations of Odisha. Its enduring presence in the state's musical life reflects the resilience of indigenous traditions and their capacity to preserve cultural identity across generations. As a symbol of Odishan heritage, the Mardala continues to inspire performers, scholars, and audiences while affirming the unique place of Odisha in the cultural landscape of India.

4. Conclusion

The Mardala has evolved over centuries as one of the most distinctive symbols of Odisha's musical and cultural heritage. Its historical journey, rooted in ancient percussion traditions and enriched by temple culture, devotional practices, and classical performing arts, demonstrates the continuity of Odisha's rich artistic legacy. From its early association with religious rituals to its present status as the principal percussion instrument of Odissi music and dance, the Mardala has consistently reflected the dynamic relationship between music, culture, and society.

This study reveals that the significance of the Mardala extends far beyond its rhythmic function. It embodies the historical memory, indigenous craftsmanship, and aesthetic values that have shaped Odishan musical traditions. Its close association with the Jagannath Temple, the Mahari and Gotipua traditions, and the development of Odissi has established it as a defining marker of Odisha's regional identity. Through the *guru-shishya paramparā*, generations of musicians have preserved not only technical knowledge but also the philosophical and cultural values embedded within the tradition.

The historical analysis further demonstrates that the Mardala has successfully adapted to changing socio-cultural contexts while retaining its traditional essence. The revival of Odissi during the twentieth century, the establishment of music and dance institutions, and the increasing participation of artists in national and international cultural forums have contributed significantly to its continued relevance. These developments have transformed the Mardala into a powerful cultural ambassador, representing Odisha's artistic excellence on global platforms.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of safeguarding this invaluable heritage. Comprehensive documentation of traditional compositions, encouragement of young performers, support for instrument makers, and the promotion of research in musicology and ethnomusicology are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Mardala tradition. Greater collaboration among academic institutions, cultural organizations, and government agencies can further strengthen efforts to preserve and promote this unique percussion heritage.

In conclusion, the Mardala is not merely an accompanying instrument but a living symbol of Odishan musical identity. It represents the historical continuity of the state's performing arts, the spiritual ethos of its temple culture, and the creative achievements of its musicians and artisans. Its enduring presence in ritual, education, and performance affirms its status as an integral component of India's intangible cultural heritage. Preserving the Mardala is therefore not only an act of conserving a musical tradition but also a commitment to sustaining the cultural identity and historical legacy of Odisha for future generations.

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