



NEET Controversy: Ensure India's Examination Integrity

*This editorial is based on "[Preventing another NEET fiasco](#)" which was published in *The Hindu* on 26/06/2024. The article examines the allegations of misconduct and paper leaks during the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET-UG) and advocates for the implementation and compliance of comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure a transparent examination system in the country.*

For Prelims: [National Eligibility Entrance Test \(NEET\)](#), [National Testing Agency \(NTA\)](#), [The Public Examinations \(Prevention of Unfair Means\) Act](#), [Right To Education Act of 2009](#), [New Education Policy 2020](#), [Rashtriya Uchhatar Shiksha Abhiyan \(RUSA\)](#), [Early Childhood Care and Education](#)

For Mains: NEET UG Result 2024 Controversy, Arguments in Favour and Against of the New Public Examinations Act, Steps Ahead to Ensure Fair Examination System in India.

The **NEET-UG** controversy has spotlighted the widespread issue of paper leaks, a malpractice that has plagued India for years. In the past seven years, there have been 70 confirmed exam leaks across 15 states, casting serious doubts on the integrity of the nation's examinations.

These leaks have disrupted the schedules of 1.7 crore applicants. The recent NEET-UG 2024 paper leak, affecting an all-India exam with over 24 lakh aspirants, underscores the considerable influence of the paper leak mafia over India's examination system.

What is the National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET-UG)?

- **NEET (UG)** is one of the toughest medical entrance examinations conducted in India. National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) is conducted by the [National Testing Agency \(NTA\)](#) for admission to undergraduate (**MBBS/BDS/Ayush Courses**) every year.
- The single national level undergraduate medical entrance exam, NEET, is held every year for admission to medical, dental, [AYUSH](#), and BVSc (Bachelor of Veterinary Science) and AH (Animal Husbandry) colleges in India.
- The NEET exam is conducted online and in 11 languages — English, Hindi, Marathi, Odia, Tamil, Marathi, Urdu Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, and Assamese.
- Before the NTA, the test was conducted by the **Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)**.

What is the National Testing Agency (NTA)?

- **About:**
 - The National Testing Agency (NTA) was established in 2017 as a Society registered under the [Indian Societies Registration Act, of 1860](#).

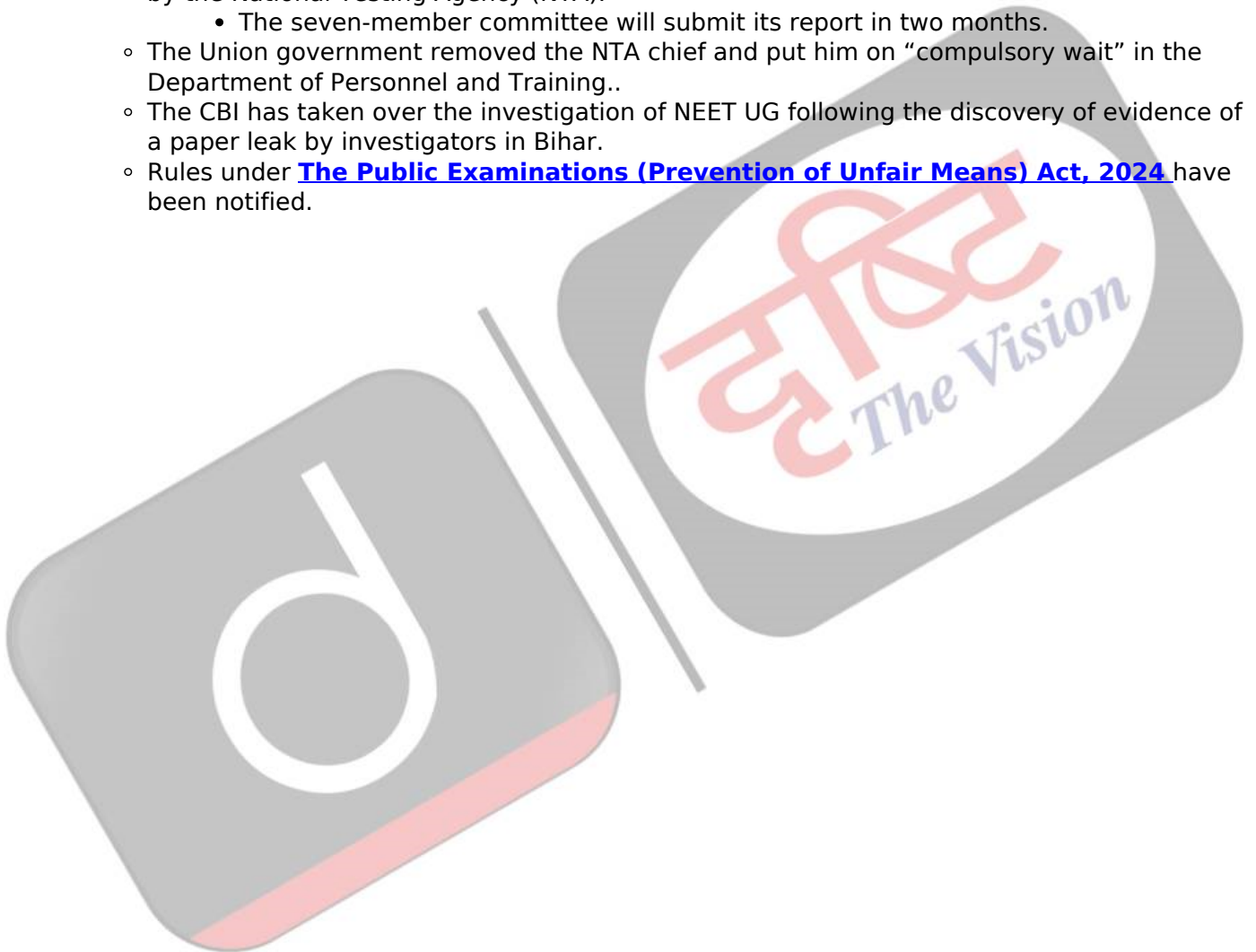
- It is an autonomous and self-sustained testing organisation to conduct entrance examinations for admission in higher educational institutions.
- NTA conducts three top undergraduate admissions entrance exams- JEE-Main for engineering, NEET-UG for medicine and CUET-UG for admissions to several other undergraduate courses.
- Besides these, the testing agency conducts CUET-PG for postgraduate admissions, UGC-NET and CSIR UGC-NET.
 - UGC-NET is a test to determine the eligibility for the award of junior research fellowship, for appointment as assistant professor and admission to PhD in Indian universities and colleges.
 - CSIR UGC-NET is accepted for PhD admissions in Chemical Sciences, Earth, Atmospheric, Ocean and Planetary Sciences, Life Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, and Physical Sciences.
- Common Management Admission Test (CMAT), Hotel Management Joint Entrance Examination, Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test and entrance tests for Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) and Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), are among other tests conducted by NTA.
- **Governance:**
 - NTA is chaired by an eminent educationist appointed by the Ministry of Education.
 - The Director General of NTA, in the rank and pay equivalent to the Joint Secretary to Government of India is its Chief Executive Officer.
 - The Government of India give directions to the NTA and the General Body in respect of its policies and the NTA is bound to comply with such directions.
 - The administration of the NTA has been entrusted to the Governing Body comprising members from user institutions
- **Functions:**
 - To identify partner institutions with adequate infrastructure from the existing schools and higher education institutions that would facilitate the conduct of online examinations without adversely impacting their academic routine.
 - To create a question bank for all subjects using modern techniques.
 - To establish a strong R&D culture as well as a pool of experts in different aspects of testing.
 - To collaborate with international organisations like ETS (Educational Testing Services).
 - To undertake any other examination that is entrusted to it by the Ministries/Departments of Government of India/State Governments.

Why is the NEET-UG Result 2024 Controversy?

- **Allegations of Misconduct :**
 - This year, on May 5, over 24 lakh students appeared for the NEET-UG exam at 4,750 centres across 571 cities, including 14 international locations.
 - The result was declared on June 4, which immediately caused a hue and cry with aspirants raising multiple issues, such as the **awarding of grace marks to over 1,500 students**, an unusually high number of students achieving perfect scores, and allegations of a leaked question paper.
 - The results showed that **67 students achieved a total score of 720**, which is a higher percentage compared to the previous years' results. In 2023, only two students scored full marks, while three in 2022, two in 2021, and one in 2020.
 - It is alleged that **six of the toppers had appeared for the exam at the same centre** in Haryana.
- **NTA's Stance :**
 - NTA said that the number of candidates who appeared in the 2024 exam was almost 3 lakh more than the 2023 number, and "the increase in candidates naturally led to an increase in high scorers due to a larger pool of candidates.
 - Also, according to the NTA official, the 2024 NEET was "comparatively easier" than previous years.

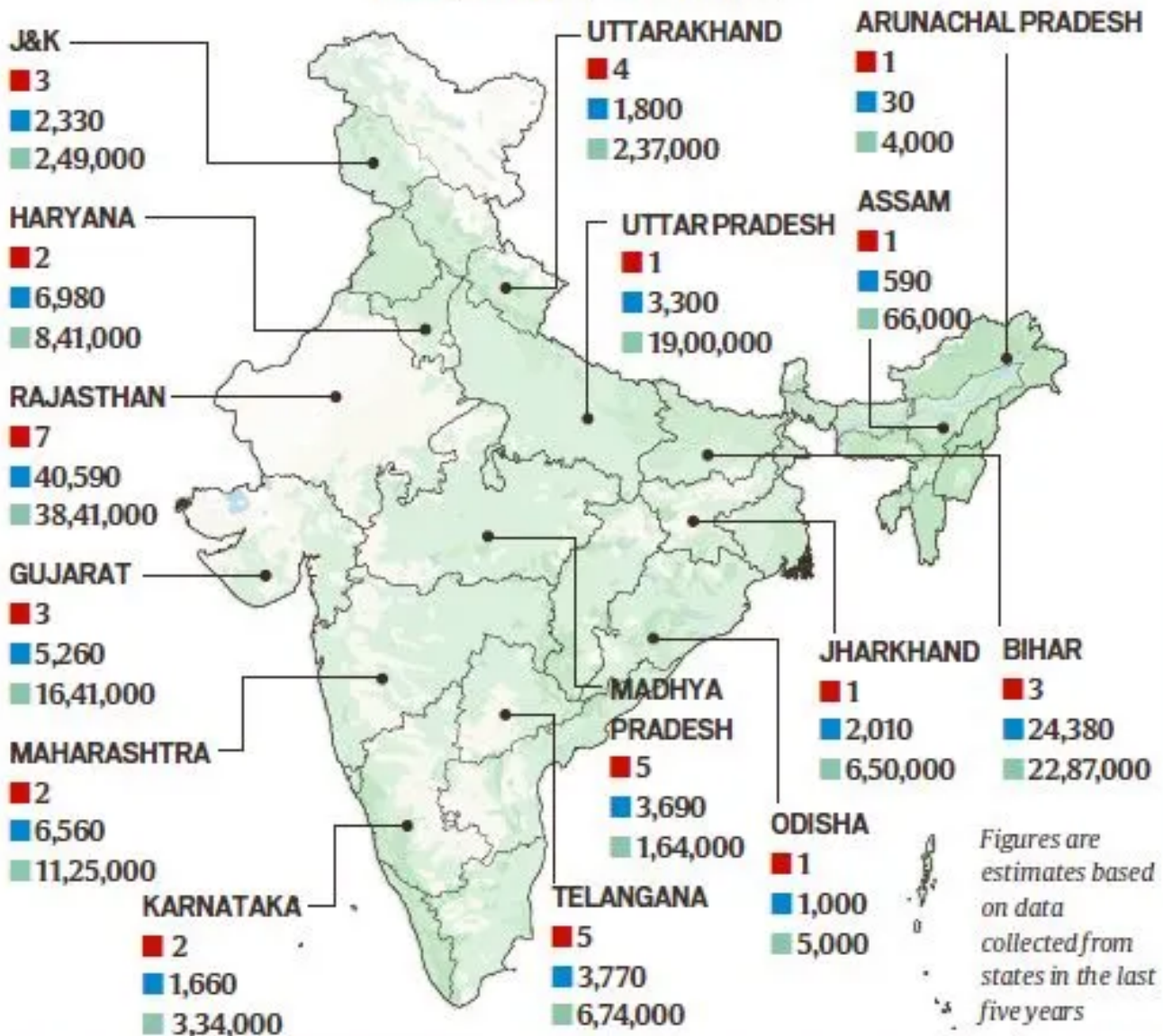
- It was argued that after the maximum marks of 720, the next highest score possible was 716, and that marks of 718 and 719 did not make sense. The NTA explained that some candidates, including six of the toppers, had got “compensatory marks for loss of time.
- **Supreme Court’s Ruling :**
 - The Centre has told the Supreme Court that it will conduct a retest for 1,563 students, who were given grace marks in the NEET-UG 2024. The re-exam was conducted on June 23.
 - The Supreme Court has decided not to stop the admissions counseling process. If any of the 1,563 candidates opt out of the retest, their previous marks without the grace marks will be used for the results.
- **Government Stance :**
 - The **Union Education Minister** said the alleged irregularities in the recently held National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET) was **“an institutional failure of the National Testing Agency”**.
 - The Central Government announced a high-level committee, headed by former ISRO chairman Dr K Radhakrishnan, to look into the functioning and fair conduct examinations by the National Testing Agency (NTA).
 - The seven-member committee will submit its report in two months.
 - The Union government removed the NTA chief and put him on “compulsory wait” in the Department of Personnel and Training..
 - The CBI has taken over the investigation of NEET UG following the discovery of evidence of a paper leak by investigators in Bihar.
 - Rules under [The Public Examinations \(Prevention of Unfair Means\) Act, 2024](#) have been notified.

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15 states, leaks in 41 job-recruitment exams

■ Exams ■ Posts ■ Candidates



What are the Various Provisions Regarding Education and Examination in India?

▪ Constitutional Mandate :

- **Right to Education (Article 21A):** This article mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years. This was inserted by the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002.
- **Right to Equality (Article 14):** This ensures equality before the law and equal protection of the law within the territory of India. This principle underlies the need for fair and non-discriminatory educational opportunities.
- **Prohibition of Discrimination (Article 15):** This prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. It allows for special provisions for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- **Promotion of Educational and Economic Interests (Article 46):** The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of

the people, particularly the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

- **Early Childhood Care and Education (Article 45):** The State shall endeavor to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years.
- **Duty to Provide Opportunities for Education (Article 51A):** It is the duty of every citizen to provide opportunities for education to his child or ward between the ages of 6 and 14 years.

▪ **Government Initiatives :**

- [New Education Policy 2020.](#)
- [Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan \(SSA\).](#)
- [Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan.](#)
- [Rashtriya Uchhattar Shiksha Abhiyan \(RUSA\).](#)
- [National Curriculum Framework.](#)

How Far Does the Public Examinations Act, 2024 Deal with Cheating in India?

Arguments in Favour

▪ **Computer Based Test:**

- The Rules lay down the full parameters of Computer Based Tests (CBT).
- It covers from the registration of candidates, allocation of centres, and issue of admit cards to the opening and distribution of question papers, evaluation of answers, and the final recommendations.

▪ **National Recruitment Agency's Role:**

- The central government's **National Recruitment Agency** shall prepare the norms, standards, and guidelines for CBTs in consultation with stakeholders. Once finalised, these norms will be notified by the Centre.
- Norms will include physical and digital infrastructure, SOPs, candidate check-in, biometric registration, security, invigilation, and post-exam activities.

▪ **Centre Coordinator:**

- Appointed from the Central/State Government, PSUs, public sector banks, universities, or other government organizations.
- The Centre Coordinator shall be the representative of the public examination authority for coordination of activities of the various service providers and the examination authority, and for overseeing the compliance of all norms, standards, and guidelines for the exam.

▪ **Defining Public Examination Authorities:**

- **Section 2(k) of The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** defines a "public examination" as "any examination conducted by the public examination authority" listed in the Schedule of the Act.
- The Schedule lists public examination authorities which include UPSC, SSC, RRBs, IBPS, NTA, and other Central Government ministries/departments.

▪ **Use of Unfair Means:**

- **Section 3 of the Act** lists 15 actions that amount to using unfair means in public examinations "for monetary or wrongful gain".
- It includes question paper leakage, tampering with answer sheets, and providing unauthorized solutions.

▪ **Non-Bailable Provision in New Anti Cheating Law:**

- The Act provides for punishment of **a minimum of three to five years** of imprisonment to curb cheating and for those involved in **organised crimes** of cheating will face five

to **10 years of imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs 1 crore.**

Arguments Against the Law :

▪ **Existing Anti-Cheating Laws:**

- Critics argue severe punishment alone won't address cheating, as similar offences are already punishable under existing laws.
- Several states have their own anti-cheating laws, but cheating persists, indicating limited effectiveness.
 - Examples include Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Uttarakhand.

▪ **Prevalence of Organized Cheating:**

- Organized criminals with political ties often facilitate cheating, complicating enforcement.
- Innovative cheating methods and high-profile arrests highlight the ongoing challenge
 - Examples include a Russian hacker breaching IIT entrance exams and candidates using Bluetooth devices to cheat.

▪ **Focus on Punitive Measures:**

- Some critics suggest that the focus on punitive measures against individuals involved in exam malpractice may overshadow the need for systemic reforms in education, curriculum, evaluation methods, and support systems for students.

▪ **Declining Public Confidence:**

- Declining public confidence in the fairness and reliability of exams, leading to protests, litigation, and demands for reforms from various stakeholders.
- Disputes and protests over exam results, such as the railway recruitment test, demonstrate the ongoing issues in the examination system should be addressed effectively.

▪ **Discretion of State Governments:**

- While the act aims to serve as a model for states to adopt, the discretion given to state governments may lead to variations in implementation across different states.
 - This could potentially weaken the effectiveness of the law in preventing unfair means in public examinations.

What Should be the Steps Ahead to Ensure a Fair Examination System in India?

▪ **Creation of a National Examination Integrity Council (NEIC):**

- The government should consider the creation of a National Examination Integrity Council that would be responsible for overseeing the conduct of all major examinations across the country, ensuring uniform standards and practices.
- The Council may conduct regular audits to assess the effectiveness of examination processes and identify areas for improvement.
- There should be strong governance in the form of foolproof and complete Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and their compliance.

▪ **Transparent Recruitment and Accountability**

- Ensure that key positions within examination bodies are filled based on merit and integrity, reducing the chances of corruption and collusion.
- Implement robust whistleblower protection mechanisms to encourage reporting of malpractices without fear of retaliation.

▪ **On-Demand Testing:**

- Shift to an **on-demand computer-based testing model similar to GRE**, where students can schedule their exams at their convenience. This reduces the logistical burden of conducting exams for millions on a single day and mitigates the risk of leaks.
- Develop a large pool of questions for each subject, allowing the system to generate unique question papers for each candidate to minimize cheating opportunities.

▪ **Digital Security Measures:**

- Employ blockchain to create an immutable record of examination processes, from question paper setting to result declaration. This would ensure that any tampering is easily detectable.
- Utilize state-of-the-art encryption techniques to protect question papers and candidate information from unauthorized access.

- **Rigorous Enforcement:**
 - Reduce the invigilator-to-student ratio to ensure better supervision during exams.
 - [The Public Examination Act, 2024](#) should be rigorously enforced, with stringent penalties for malpractice, including fines, imprisonment, and lifetime bans from appearing in future exams for offenders
- **Secure Transportation and Storage:**
 - Use tamper-evident packaging and [GPS tracking](#) for the transportation of physical examination materials. Storage facilities should be highly secure and monitored 24/7.
 - Install CCTV cameras in all examination centers, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all activities. Recorded footage should be reviewed in case of any disputes or allegations of malpractice.
- **Post-Examination Processes:**
 - Implement double-blind evaluation processes where multiple examiners independently grade the answer scripts. This reduces bias and errors.
 - Establish a dedicated cell for quick resolution of discrepancies or grievances related to examination results.
- **Reducing Exam Pressure:**
 - Reduce over-reliance on single-day exams by incorporating continuous assessment, project work, and interviews as part of the evaluation process.
 - [NEP 2020](#) seeks to transform learning assessments from a summative approach that primarily tests rote memorization to a more regular, formative, and competency-based system that evaluates higher-order skills such as analysis, critical thinking, and conceptual clarity.
- **Cultural and Educational Shifts:**
 - Conduct workshops and seminars on ethics and integrity for students, educators, and examination officials to instill the importance of honesty in examinations.
 - Launch awareness campaigns highlighting the repercussions of examination malpractices and promoting a culture of fairness and hard work.

Conclusion

By fostering a culture of integrity at every level—through enhanced surveillance, robust governance frameworks, and comprehensive stakeholder engagement—we can safeguard the sanctity of examinations. This vision not only protects the aspirations of millions of students but also strengthens India's educational foundation, paving the way for a more equitable and merit-based society.

Drishti Mains Question :

How effective will the Public Examinations Act, 2024 be in combating cheating in India? What steps should be taken to ensure a fair examination system in the country?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

(a) 1 and 2 only

- (b) 3, 4 and 5 only
(c) 1, 2 and 5 only
(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans: D

Mains

Q. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. **(2020)**

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