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## THE ECONOMIC DECLINE OF AGRA UNDER BRITISH RULE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

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### Abstract

This research paper comprehensively investigates the economic regression of Agra, a city of profound historical importance in India, throughout the epoch of British colonial dominion. Formerly renowned as a thriving nucleus of commerce, cultural effulgence, and artisanal finesse, Agra underwent a gradual erosion of its economic eminence under British governance. This scholarly inquiry meticulously probes the multifaceted determinants that conduced to Agra's economic declination, encompassing an array of British policies, commercial methodologies, and their ramifications on indigenous industries and labor frameworks.

Furthermore, the study undertakes an exhaustive exploration of the broader socio-economic repercussions stemming from Agra's downturn, encompassing its reverberations across the local populace and the overarching regional economic landscape. By rigorously scrutinizing historical records, economic indicators, and pertinent scholarly discourse, this paper substantiates its arguments, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of Agra's economic metamorphosis during the colonial epoch. Through this meticulous examination, we glean insights into the complex interplay of colonial dynamics and indigenous economic systems, thereby augmenting our scholarly grasp of historical economic transformations and their far-reaching implications.

**Key words:** Economy, Revenue policies, Tax system, Agriculture.

### Introduction

Agra, a city brimming with historical richness and cultural grandeur, stands as a testament to centuries of opulence, flourishing as a bustling epicenter of trade, masterful craftsmanship, and artistic brilliance during the illustrious reign of the Mughal emperors. This vibrant past, however, met a profound turning point with the advent of British colonial dominance in the late 18th century. Once a thriving nucleus of power and cultural magnificence, Agra experienced a gradual and relentless decline in its economic vitality under British rule.

This manuscript embarks on a scholarly journey to dissect a pivotal chapter in India's history, unveiling the intricate story of Agra's economic descent during the era of British colonialism. The demise of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of British supremacy marked a seismic shift in the trajectory of Agra, reshaping its economic fabric under the influences of British mercantilism and imperialistic ambitions. This transformative epoch redefined the fate of the city and the fortunes of its inhabitants. This paper carefully examines how Agra's economy declined during the British rule. We used many primary literature sources to understand why Agra's economy went down. We also summarized what other researchers have said about this topic to get different viewpoints. The objectives of this exploration are twofold: firstly, to illuminate the policies and practices introduced by the British colonial administration, which reshaped the economic landscape of Agra; and secondly, to examine the far-reaching socio-economic repercussions of this decline, encompassing its impact on the city's populace, industries, and regional trade networks.

Agra, bearing the legacy of economic prowess from its Mughal heritage, buoyed by a thriving agrarian base, a network of skilled artisans, and a strategic position along pivotal trade routes, witnessed its equilibrium disrupted by the ascendancy of the British East India Company and its exploitative economic maneuvers. The nuanced narrative of Agra's economic decline is woven through a tapestry of circumstances, each thread unraveling deeper layers of history. The local populace bore the weight of draconian tax policies and revenue measures, imposing an undue burden and stifling commercial vibrancy. Simultaneously, the orchestrated dismantling of traditional industries, particularly textiles and handicrafts, struck a blow at the heart of artisanal livelihoods, leading to the collapse of thriving markets.



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Under British dominion, the very foundations of labor dynamics underwent a profound transformation, marked by exploitative practices and unequal opportunities, sowing the seeds of destitution within the working class. These socio-economic changes reverberated through Agra's urban fabric, accentuating the contrast between its illustrious past and the challenges of the present. As this historical expedition unfolds, it becomes apparent that Agra's economic decline radiates far beyond its immediate borders. The vestiges of colonial influence have left an indelible imprint on the region's contemporary socio-economic structure. Unraveling the intricacies of this historical saga not only illuminates the past but also furnishes valuable insights for contemporary dialogues on economic development, social equity, and the enduring echoes of post-colonial nation-building.

## Methodology

The paper is underpinned by a robust historical methodology, harnessing a multifaceted array of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources encompass archival records, official documents, and contemporaneous accounts sourced directly from the British colonial era. The thorough examination of secondary sources, inclusive of scholarly articles, books, and research papers, supplement these investigations, culminating in a comprehensive panorama of Agra's economic downturn during British rule. The analytical framework of this study integrates data analysis and comparative studies, orchestrated to discern subtle fluctuations in economic indicators across temporal dimensions. This methodological dyad facilitates a meticulous dissection of the intricate forces that catalyzed Agra's economic regression. With an unwavering focus on the Agra case study, this scholarly endeavor casts a luminous spotlight on the economic historiography of India within the crucible of British colonization. Imbued with an exploratory ethos, this work strives to unravel the layers of Agra's economic decline, thereby engendering nuanced insights into the far-reaching impact of colonial dominion on local economies and sociocultural paradigms. The overarching aim of this article is to illuminate the intricate tapestry of causes underpinning Agra's economic descent. This illumination not only deepens historical understanding but also offers a vantage point to examine the broader repercussions of colonial governance, unfurling its influence upon local economic dynamics and the very fabric of everyday life. By discerning the historical levers that contributed to Agra's economic contraction, this study furnishes a robust foundation, equipping researchers, and policymakers with an enriched toolkit to navigate the labyrinthine complexities of colonial economic exploitation.

## Economic Significance of Agra during the Mughal Era

The tapestry of history weaves Agra into a vibrant epicenter of economic importance during the Mughal era, a city that commanded pivotal roles in both regional and global trade networks. The Mughal Empire, reigning from the early 16th to the mid-18th century, emerged as an indomitable epitome of prosperity and supremacy in the mosaic of South Asian sovereignties. Agra's strategic embrace along the Yamuna River's banks in northern India endowed it with a profound role, evolving into a dynamic crucible of commerce and economic vitality.

Amid the zenith of the Mughal Empire's ascendancy, it laid claim to unparalleled dominion over resources that etched an unprecedented chapter within Indian history, resonating across the expanses of the entire continent. Historiographical discourse, fortified by the scholarly insights of R.C. Dutt, a foremost exponent of nationalist historiography, aptly characterizes sixteenth-century India as an amalgamation of prolific manufacturing and agrarian splendor [1]. In parallel, Western chroniclers, awestruck, chronicled the resplendent feats of Mughal India. The Mughal court, spanning the luminous eras from Akbar to Shah Jahan, beckoned some of the most incandescent intellects from around the globe, fostering an atmosphere rich in religious tolerance and cosmopolitan ideals. The architectural prowess of splendid mosques and palaces graced the urban landscapes of Agra, Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri, and Lahore, emboldening the flourishing realms of literature and painting.

Within this opulent tableau, the privileged echelons of society found themselves ensconced within fortified bastions that bore witness to ramparts, harems, fountains, and an entourage of slaves and domestic aides. References substantiate that their attire mirrored luxury, characterized by garments meticulously tailored from premium-grade cotton and silk fabrics



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[2]. The symphony of prosperity resonated further through a plethora of skilled artisans, orchestrating an array of handicraft businesses that manifested as high-quality cotton textiles, silks, jewels, as well as intricately embellished swords and weaponry, catering diligently to the discerning desires of the affluent[3].

This economic and cultural renaissance germinated primarily within urban enclaves, catalyzed by the dissolution of caste limitations that historically segregated artisans [4]. Scholarly elucidations underscore the transformative tide brought by the Muslim era, with urban centers burgeoning and urban populations surpassing those seen during the reigns of Hindu monarchs. Agra, standing as a testament, emerged as an epicenter of innovation, becoming the nucleus where luxury industries converged, coalescing artistic prowess and economic dynamism.

### Minting hub and Agra's pivotal role in imperial coinage

Agra stood as a venerable bastion within the Mughal Empire's expansive canvas, assuming a pivotal mantle as one of the empire's paramount mints, where the symphony of coins found its eloquent crescendo. Under the stewardship of the Mughal emperors, Agra became a crucible where the art of coinage unfolded, each minted piece a resplendent testament to the empire's opulence and unwavering stability. The minting of coins emerged as a quintessential underpinning of administrative and economic facets, bestowing an indispensable rhythm upon the Mughal epoch. Within this rich tapestry, the Mughal emperors issued an eclectic tapestry of coins, a diversified ensemble encapsulating gold, silver, and copper denominations. Among the pantheon of coins, the gold mohur, the silver rupee, and the copper dam held sway, each an emblem of the Mughal financial narrative. The contours of these coins were often embossed with inscriptions in the eloquent Arabic or Persian script, bearing the imprints of the emperor's name and the epochal regional year. The celestial dance of the zodiac was harnessed in gold, with Agra emerging as a nexus for the creation of gold zodiac mohurs, while the silver counterparts found form in the artisanal crucible of Ahmadabad. It is within this intricate symphony that Agra etched its chapter, an ephemeral yet significant one, producing a select assembly of silver coins in tandem with the golden zodiac mohurs. This delicate ballet was choreographed through the medium of dies, the meticulously crafted tools that imparted form to the coins, resulting in the birth of a limited number of silver coins, an exquisite fusion of Agra's craftsmanship and the numismatic splendor that characterized the Mughal era[5].

### Artisan enclave: Agra's flourishing legacy of craftsmanship

Agra, steeped in the rich tapestry of history, emerged as a haven for virtuoso craftsmen and artisans, their talents cascading through a kaleidoscope of artistic expressions encompassing architecture, stone carving, metalwork, and the intricate art of carpet weaving. This thriving artisan enclave, nestled within the heart of India, bore witness to a symphony of creative brilliance that resonated far beyond its geographical confines. Under the aegis of the Mughal emperors, Agra's landscape metamorphosed into an artistic crucible, yielding iconic monuments that etched their indelible presence on the annals of time. The resplendent Taj Mahal and the formidable Agra Fort stand as emblems of this artistic renaissance, testaments to the confluence of imperial patronage and local craftsmanship. Beyond their architectural grandeur, these monuments served as founts of employment, infusing vigor into the city's socio-economic fabric. The artistic endeavors undertaken in Agra radiated multifaceted benefits. The inception of these monumental projects ushered in an era of robust employment opportunities, enveloping a diverse array of artisans in the embrace of creative labor. The intricate marble inlays of the Taj Mahal, the elaborately carved sandstone motifs adorning the Agra Fort, and the meticulous metalwork that adorned these structures required the skilled touch of a legion of craftsmen. Thus, these ventures transcended their aesthetic significance, fostering a surge in local craftsmanship that reverberated through time. Agra's legacy of artistic prowess endured through generations, weaving a narrative of cultural vibrancy that resonated across epochs. The echoes of skilled hands shaping stone, the delicate dance of artisans weaving intricate carpets, and the rhythmic symphony of metalwork melded into a crescendo of creativity that adorned Agra's heritage. As the sun sets over the iconic minarets and palatial ramparts, Agra stands as a testament to the interplay between imperial vision and local ingenuity, a city where the strokes of artisans' chisels and the threads of their looms wove together a legacy that continues to captivate hearts and minds.



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## Agra's Geopolitical Triumph: The Lustrous Tapestry of Mughal Trade and Commerce

The historical tapestry of Agra's economic prowess is interwoven with its strategic geographic positioning, a central narrative in the city's vibrant engagement in both regional and international trade. This city emerged as a pivotal nexus, effectively bridging the gap between the northern and southern regions of India[6]. What truly solidified Agra's prominence on the trade map was its vital connection to the legendary Grand Trunk Road, a lifeline of commerce. This historic thoroughfare not only served as the primary conduit connecting Agra to bustling trade centers such as Delhi and Lahore, but it also functioned as the linchpin for a vast network of trade routes that spanned from east to west and north to south, intricately stitching together the subcontinent's economic web. A noteworthy facet of Agra's ascendancy in trade was the confluence of goods and commodities coursing through these terrestrial trade routes. This abundant flow intertwined with the commerce carried out on the Yamuna and Ganga rivers, creating a thriving trade amalgamation. Remarkably, this crucial confluence of commerce transpired at a location meticulously chosen as the political epicenter of the Mughal Empire, thereby further amplifying its economic significance. Agra, in this context, masterfully juggled its dual roles as a thriving commercial hub and the very heart of the Mughal dynasty. This seamless duality not only facilitated the economic growth of the region but also solidified Agra's stature as a powerhouse of commerce in its own right. In the course of these multifaceted operations, Agra played a pivotal role in shaping a vast hinterland with an intricate web of connections that transcended the boundaries of the Suba[7]. This expansion significantly augmented the marketability of the region's products, turning Agra into an economic dynamo of the Mughal Empire. Analogous trade activities burgeoned in smaller towns across the region, further underscoring Agra's indelible mark in shaping the economic landscape of the era.

### The Impact of Indian Textiles: A Glimpse into Agra's Economic Legacy

In the annals of history, few commodities have wielded as profound an influence on global markets during the Middle Ages as Indian textiles. India, renowned for both cotton and silk fabrics, from the humble to the opulent, stood as a textile powerhouse. [8] The city of Agra, during the Mughal era, emerged as a beacon in this thriving industry. It was celebrated for producing superlative cotton textiles, showcasing intricate muslins and vibrant calico fabrics that commanded tremendous demand in regional and international markets. These prized textiles found their way to distant shores, enriching the markets of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe[9]. Notably, the English imported substantial quantities of cotton, much of which underwent bleaching in Gujarat's Broach, attesting to the resounding global appeal of Agra's textile productions. A fascinating facet of Agra's economic evolution was its proximity to the prime indigo-producing regions of Bayana and Kol-Khurja. This fortuitous location played a pivotal role in elevating Agra into a prominent center for the art of dyeing, a skill of paramount significance during that epoch [10]. Agra, alongside Fatehpur Sikri and Alwar, constituted primary hubs for the creation of common and woolen carpets. Notably, Akbar's reign witnessed the inception of this initiative, signifying his enduring legacy in the region's textile trade[7]. European travelers of the era regarded Mughal India with an air of opulence, attributing it to the extravagance of court life, the global allure of Indian silks and muslins, the grandeur of Indian cities, and the relative disdain for European goods. Undoubtedly, the elite class relished a high standard of living, amassing more gold and precious stones than their European counterparts. However, beneath this veneer of prosperity, there exists compelling evidence of a less fortunate majority of the populace, whose conditions were notably more challenging than their European counterparts. The zenith of the Mughal economy materialized during Akbar's rule (1556–1605), followed by a period of unparalleled revenue increase under Shah Jahan, marking the highest revenue collection in the annals of Indian history, estimated at Rs. 341,15,052.[11] Yet, the decline of the Mughal Empire saw Agra's reins pass into the hands of Jats and Marathas chieftains, a time when the city retained its status as a formidable trade center. Sir Jadunath Sarkar aptly observed that "the rich fugitives from Delhi had taken refuge in Agra, and it was the best center of trade in upper India in those troubled times[12]. Nevertheless, Agra's fortunes waned as time progressed [13], particularly when the British arrived in India, establishing their dominion over the subcontinent. In a pivotal moment on October 18, 1803, the British East India Company asserted suzerainty over the formidable fort of Agra[14]. This marked a significant milestone in the Company's expanding influence across India, paving the way for increased British control and sway over the region in the ensuing years.





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## Agra's Economic Transformations under British Colonial Rule

The British colonial era in India, including Agra, marked a profound shift in the region's economic landscape. The policies and practices implemented by the British government were distinctly geared towards harnessing India's vast resources for the benefit of the British Empire, a strategy that yielded a spectrum of effects on Agra's economic fortunes. To appreciate the extent of this transformation, one can juxtapose the land revenue statistics. During the Mughal era, the revenue collected from these territories alone stood at a staggering Rs. 2 crore and 50 lakhs[15]. However, by 1801, the revenue from all sources, including land and other taxes, had dwindled to a mere Rs. 1,35,20,474, a stark indicator of the precipitous economic decline that had befallen the region[16]. A significant turning point in Agra's economic history occurred when the city, alongside other conquered territories, was ceded to the British East India Company as part of the Treaty of SurjiArjundgaon with the Marathas[17]. At the time of its cession, the conditions in these ceded districts were nothing short of deplorable. The ineptitude of the Awadh Government, coupled with bureaucratic oppressions and the stronghold of the feudal order, had siphoned the region of its wealth. The industrious found their efforts penalized, commerce, though not completely obliterated, languished, and the state's revenue, stemming from land and other taxes, was collected with arduous difficulty[18]. As a further blow to Agra's economic prospects, Henry Walsley, in his capacity as a British administrator, ordered the closure of numerous mints located within Agra, which had once been the very heart of the Mughal Empire. These mints were subsequently relocated to Bareilly and Allahabad, where currency production is now concentrated. The shift of the ceded district's capital to Bareilly compounded Agra's economic challenges[19, 20].

### Agra's Economic Evolution Under British Colonial Rule: Unpacking the Complexities

#### a. The Ceded and Conquered Provinces

Between 1805 and 1834, the British East India Company held sway over a substantial tract of northern India, aptly referred to as the Ceded and Conquered Provinces[21]. This expansive region, encompassing nearly the entirety of present-day Uttar Pradesh, with notable exceptions being the Lucknow and Faizabad divisions of Awadh, also included the Delhi territory. Notably, after 1816, it expanded further to encompass the Kumaun division and a substantial portion of the Garhwal division, which today constitutes modern Uttarakhand[21]. In 1836, it was designated as the North-Western Provinces and was initially governed by a Lieutenant-Governor, later being incorporated into the Agra Province within the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1904[21].

#### b. The Ceded Provinces

During the early 19th century, the ambit of British rule was confined to the Benares division and the Allahabad fort within present-day Uttar Pradesh. In 1801, Nawab Saadat Ali of Awadh relinquished territories to the British, seeking their protection against the looming threat posed by Zaman Shah Durrani. These ceded territories encompassed Gorakhpur and Rohilkhand divisions, along with districts including Allahabad, Fatehpur, Cawnpore, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah, and a segment of Mirzapur, collectively known as the Ceded Provinces. A year later, the Nawab of Farrukhabad also ceded the Farrukhabad district to British authority[22].

#### c. The Conquered Provinces:

Following the Second Anglo-Maratha War, General Lake embarked on a significant territorial acquisition, assuming control over the Meerut division, which included Aligarh. The conquest swiftly expanded to encompass the entirety of the Agra division, which included Agra city and surrounding districts proximate to Delhi. Subsequently, additional territories were annexed, such as the trans-Jamuna districts of Hamirpur and Banda, along with a small portion in Jalaun district[23]. In 1816, following the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepalese War, the Treaty of Sugauli was inked, leading to the annexation of the Dehradun district and the Kumaun division, a seminal moment in the formation of the present-day Uttarakhand state.

#### d. Administrative Transformation

The Ceded and Conquered Districts constituted the bedrock upon which the North-Western Provinces were eventually erected. The contours of governance and administrative frameworks for these regions were meticulously crafted in the mid-1805. In August of the same year, the Governor-General took the consequential step of abolishing the post of the Secretary for the Affairs of the Ceded and Conquered Districts, assuming direct responsibility for governance. Judicial and revenue affairs were entrusted to the Judicial and Commercial department, while commercial matters



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were overseen by the Public and Commercial department of the Supreme Government. Subsequently, these territories were rebranded as the Upper Provinces[24]. After 1834, the upper provinces were emancipated from the Bengal presidency, christened the Agra presidency, marking an era of distinct administration[25].

#### e. **The Burden of the Zamindari System**

The Zamindari system, also known as the Permanent Settlement, served as a financial noose during British rule. Introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793, its aim was to fix land revenue demands on landholders in perpetuity. A parallel arrangement was reached with farmers and landowners in the Ceded and Conquered Districts in 1803 and 1805, following the model of the permanent settlement in Bengal. However, this exploitative system led to the severe exploitation of farmers, with pockets of resistance, such as Agra, where landholders refused to pay land revenue and agitated against the British. The British East India Company ruthlessly suppressed these protests and severely punished the agitators. Moreover, after exploiting farmers through this predatory land revenue policy, Lord Minto sought to introduce additional taxation in the form of a house tax to augment revenue.[26]

#### f. **Commodification of Agriculture**

The British administration actively promoted the cultivation of cash crops such as indigo and cotton, shifting the focus away from subsistence farming. This transformation engendered food shortages and indebtedness among the farming community[27].

#### g. **Impact on Local Industries**

Agra, like many other regions in India, experienced a substantial transformation in its local industries during British rule, particularly in textiles, handicrafts, and agriculture. The traditional textiles industry, famed for its exquisite craftsmanship and intricate designs, faced a relentless decline. British policies, characterized by heavy taxation and the promotion of British-made textiles, had a detrimental impact on local weavers and artisans. The advent of machine-made British textiles further compounded the challenges faced by Agra's handloom weavers[28].

#### h. **Handicrafts in Decline**

Agra was renowned for its marble carving, embroidery, and various other handicrafts. However, the British era brought about a downturn in the handicraft industry[29]. The influx of British goods and shifting consumer preferences contributed to the decline of traditional crafts. Reduced demand and patronage for regional handicrafts eventually culminated in their extinction[30].

### **The Socio-Economic Ramifications of Agra's Decline Under British Rule**

The decline of Agra's local industries during the British colonial era had profound and enduring socio-economic consequences that reverberated throughout the city and its surrounding regions. These consequences encompassed economic hardships, urban stagnation, and disruptions in regional trade relationships, fundamentally shaping Agra's socio-economic fabric during the colonial period.

#### a. **Economic Hardships and Displacement**

The erosion of traditional industries and the shift towards cash crops at the expense of food crops inflicted severe economic hardships on Agra's local population. The skilled artisans and weavers, whose livelihoods were once intricately tied to the thriving textiles and handicraft sectors, now confronted unemployment and poverty. The commercialization of agriculture, favoring cash crops, exacerbated the predicament by leading to food shortages and distress among the farming community. These economic tribulations propelled a wave of population displacement, driving many to seek opportunities in other regions. This phenomenon, in turn, contributed to increased urbanization as individuals gravitated towards cities in pursuit of improved prospects [31].

#### b. **Urban Stagnation**

The decline of Agra's traditional industries impacted urban development. With the diminishing demand for locally produced goods, the once-thriving urban centers dedicated to crafts and trade faced stagnation. The loss of patronage for artisans and craftsmen resulted in the decay of traditional bazaars and marketplaces. Moreover, British policies promoting



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the growth of cities like Calcutta and Bombay further diverted resources and investments from Agra's urban development. Agra had long been a center of regional trade, but the decline of its industries weakened its position in the regional trade network. As traditional crafts and textiles lost competitiveness, Agra's role as a trade hub diminished. Additionally, the influx of British goods through ports controlled by the British East India Company affected Agra's trade relations with neighboring regions, further impacting its economic ties with the surrounding areas.[32]

### c. Erosion of Regional Trade Hub Status

Agra had long held a pivotal role as a center of regional trade. However, the decline of its indigenous industries significantly weakened its standing in the regional trade network. The diminishing competitiveness of traditional crafts and textiles had a direct impact on Agra's stature as a trade hub. Moreover, the deluge of British goods, funneled through ports controlled by the British East India Company, had a detrimental effect on Agra's trade relationships with neighboring regions. This inundation disrupted the city's economic ties with surrounding areas, reshaping the dynamics of regional trade and exerting further strain on Agra's already beleaguered economy[32].

### Conclusion

Agra's economic decline during the British colonial era was a complex interplay of factors that reverberated through the region's economy, society, and cultural heritage. Central to this decline were issues of agrarian distress, limited industrialization, the disruption of traditional crafts, and insufficient infrastructure development. The repercussions of this decline endured and left a lasting imprint on Agra's socio-economic landscape, persisting even after gaining independence. The historical analysis presented here offers valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by regions subjected to colonial rule. It serves as a poignant reminder of the imperative to craft well-informed policies and embrace sustainable development strategies, addressing historical inequalities while fostering inclusive growth in the present day.

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