

Gurukul and Deschooling: A Critical Comparative Inquiry into Alternative Education Models

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary education system has come under growing scrutiny for its rigid institutional structure, standardised curriculum, and its overriding emphasis on certification rather than genuine learning. Students across the world are increasingly processed through systems that reward compliance and recall over curiosity, creativity, and character development. In response to these deep-rooted limitations, the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich (1971) proposed the radical concept of deschooling — a fundamental reimagining of education that moves away from compulsory institutional schooling toward decentralised, self-directed, and community-embedded learning. Illich argued that schools, as currently structured, serve institutional interests far more than the interests of individual learners or society as a whole. Interestingly, many of the principles Illich articulated find a striking and largely unacknowledged parallel in the ancient Indian Gurukul system, which flourished centuries before modern schooling emerged. In the Gurukul tradition, students lived and learned alongside a wise teacher in a community setting, developing knowledge, character, and practical wisdom through direct engagement with life rather than through textbook instruction. This paper undertakes a critical conceptual analysis of the correlation between the Gurukul tradition and the deschooling philosophy, supported by real-world examples of contemporary initiatives. Through a systematic comparison of their foundational principles, pedagogical approaches, and social orientations, the study identifies significant areas of convergence — including experiential learning, the role of the teacher as guide rather than authority, the flexibility of the curriculum, and the centrality of community in the educational process. The paper also honestly acknowledges the points of divergence, particularly the Gurukul system's deep-rooted exclusions of women and lower-caste communities, and connects both traditions to current global education reform debates. The study concludes that a thoughtful and inclusive integration of both models holds genuine promise for reforming contemporary education in ways that are more humane, equitable, and deeply meaningful.

Keywords: Gurukul System, Deschooling, Alternative Education, Experiential Learning, Ivan Illich, Ancient Indian Education, Education Reform

INTRODUCTION

Education is among the most fundamental processes through which human societies reproduce knowledge, values, and culture across generations. Yet in the twenty-first century, the dominant model of formal schooling has attracted sustained and increasingly urgent criticism from educators, philosophers, sociologists, and social thinkers around the world. Critics argue that modern schools have steadily transformed into bureaucratic institutions that are more invested in producing compliant, certifiable workers than genuinely curious, empowered, and morally grounded human beings. Students are expected to sit passively in uniform classrooms, absorb standardised content delivered at a fixed pace, and demonstrate their learning through high-stakes examinations — a process that leaves almost no room for individual curiosity, creative exploration, or engagement with real community life.

The consequences of this model are becoming increasingly visible. Dropout rates remain persistently high in many parts of the world, particularly among economically marginalised communities. Students who do complete formal schooling often report feeling alienated from what they have learned, unable to connect their academic qualifications to meaningful participation in the social and economic life of their communities. A growing body

of research in educational psychology suggests that intrinsic motivation — the desire to learn for its own sake — is systematically undermined by extrinsic reward structures such as grades, rankings, and certifications (Kumar, 2005). The result is a troubling paradox: societies are investing more resources in formal education than ever before, yet genuine learning, critical thinking, and civic engagement appear to be in decline.

It was in this spirit of deep and principled critique that the Austrian-born philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich published his landmark work *Deschooling Society* in 1971. Illich argued passionately and provocatively that compulsory schooling was not merely ineffective but actively harmful to human development and social equality. In his analysis, schools created a pervasive culture of institutional dependence, devalued the rich informal knowledge embedded in communities and everyday life, and systematically reinforced the very social inequalities they claimed to address. Illich's ideas remain deeply relevant today: they find expression in contemporary policy debates around competency-based education, open schooling, and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning by bodies such as UNESCO and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in India.

What is less frequently acknowledged in Western educational discourse is that a remarkably similar vision of education had existed in India for thousands of years, long before modern institutional schooling was conceived. The Gurukul system, which flourished across the Indian subcontinent from roughly 1500 BCE through the early medieval period, embodied many of the principles that Illich would articulate centuries later: learning through direct experience, the teacher as guide and moral exemplar rather than authority and examiner, education embedded in community life, and a curriculum responsive to the individual needs and capacities of each learner. Contemporary Gurukul-inspired institutions — such as Rabindranath Tagore's *Visva-Bharati* at Shantiniketan, which continues to operate today — demonstrate that these principles are not merely historical curiosities but living educational possibilities.

This paper explores the conceptual and philosophical correlation between the Gurukul tradition and the deschooling philosophy in order to understand what insights both can collectively offer to contemporary education reform. The paper proceeds through a structured comparative analysis, identifies both significant convergences and important differences between the two traditions, connects them to current educational policy debates, and draws practical conclusions about their relevance for reforming education today.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research methodology, drawing on the established traditions of comparative education and educational philosophy. The research is grounded in a systematic and critical review of secondary sources, selected through a purposive sampling strategy. Sources were chosen on the basis of three criteria: their scholarly authority and peer recognition, their direct relevance to either the Gurukul tradition or deschooling philosophy, and their capacity to illuminate the comparative dimensions under examination. Primary sources consulted include Illich's original *Deschooling Society* (1971) and classical Sanskrit texts on Gurukul education. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and authoritative historical accounts drawn from the fields of educational philosophy, history of education, and Indian educational history.

The comparative framework applied in this paper examines both educational traditions along six carefully defined dimensions: (1) underlying pedagogical philosophy and theory of learning, (2) the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the role of the teacher, (3) the structure and content of the curriculum, (4) the philosophy and practice of assessment, (5) the role of the community in the educational process, and (6) the broader social and ethical values each tradition seeks to cultivate. These dimensions were selected because they represent the most fundamental axes along which educational systems differ, and because they allow for a substantive and non-superficial comparison between traditions that differ widely in their historical and cultural contexts.

The analysis is further grounded by reference to real-world educational initiatives that have drawn on one or both of these traditions in practice, including Tagore's *Visva-Bharati*, the Rishi Valley School established by J. Krishnamurti, and the Swaraj University model in Udaipur. While a full empirical investigation of these institutions lies beyond the scope of the present paper, their existence and documented outcomes serve as

important evidence that the principles under examination are practically viable and not merely theoretical. The limitation of this methodology is that it cannot substitute for primary empirical fieldwork; the paper therefore concludes with specific recommendations for future empirical research that would build on and test the conceptual analysis presented here.

The Gurukul System: Historical Overview

The Gurukul system takes its name from two Sanskrit words: guru, meaning teacher or one who dispels darkness, and kula, meaning family or household. The name itself captures the essence of the institution: it was not a school in any modern sense, but a living household community centred on the relationship between a learned teacher and the students who came to live and learn in his care. The Gurukul system was the dominant model of formal education across the Indian subcontinent from approximately 1500 BCE, during the Vedic period, through the early medieval era, and it continued in modified forms well into the modern period in certain communities and regions.

At the heart of the Gurukul arrangement was the residential relationship between the Guru and his shishyas. Young students would leave their homes at an early age — often between eight and twelve years old — and take up residence in the Guru's ashram, which might be located in a forest, on the banks of a river, or at the edge of a village. They would remain there for many years, sometimes as long as twelve or twenty years, living as members of the Guru's household, participating in all aspects of its daily life, and receiving instruction woven into the fabric of that life rather than separated into distinct lessons and timetables (Nanda, 2016).

The curriculum of the Gurukul was extraordinarily broad and integrated by modern standards. Students learned the Vedic scriptures and their associated commentaries; they studied mathematics, astronomy, and the natural sciences as understood in their time; they received instruction in philosophy, ethics, governance, and law; they learned music, poetry, and the arts; and they developed physical disciplines including wrestling, archery, and yoga. These subjects were not taught as separate disciplines in isolated time slots but were woven into the daily rhythms of the ashram, emerging naturally from the work, worship, conversation, and contemplation that constituted life in the Guru's household. A student learning to tend the ashram's cattle was simultaneously learning about the natural world, about responsibility and care, and about the practical knowledge that sustained the community (Sharma, 2015).

The Guru occupied a position of profound authority and deep personal responsibility in this system. He was not primarily an instructor who delivered content and assessed performance; he was a moral exemplar, a living embodiment of the values and knowledge he sought to transmit. The relationship between Guru and shishya was intensely personal, deeply ethical, and understood to be lifelong. Assessment in the Gurukul was correspondingly qualitative and holistic: the Guru observed each student's growth in understanding, character, and practical competence over time, determining readiness through direct personal knowledge rather than through formal examination (Pathak, 2013).

The most significant contemporary expression of Gurukul principles in practice is Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati university at Shantiniketan, founded in 1921. Tagore consciously modelled his institution on Gurukul principles: classes were held outdoors under trees, the curriculum integrated arts, sciences, and practical skills, and the relationship between teacher and student was personal and holistic rather than formal and transactional. Visva-Bharati continues to operate today as a central university of India, and its founding philosophy has inspired numerous alternative schools across the country, including the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh, established by the philosopher J. Krishnamurti, which similarly emphasises holistic, non-competitive, and nature-embedded learning. These living institutions demonstrate that Gurukul-inspired education is not a nostalgic fantasy but a practical and enduring educational possibility (Kumar, 2005).

It is important, however, to acknowledge with full seriousness the profound limitations and exclusions of the historical Gurukul system. Access to Gurukul education was restricted primarily to boys from the upper castes — the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya varnas. Women were systematically excluded from formal Gurukul learning. Although ancient Indian literary and philosophical traditions preserve accounts of exceptional learned women such as Gargi and Maitreyi, these figures were exceptional precisely because they were rare; the norm

for women was exclusion from the formal structures of Gurukul education. Members of the Shudra caste and communities outside the varna system faced even more absolute exclusion, enforced not only by social custom but by religious sanction. These exclusions were not peripheral features of the Gurukul system but were structurally embedded in the caste-based social order that the system both reflected and reproduced. Any attempt to draw on the Gurukul tradition as a resource for contemporary education reform must therefore be accompanied by an explicit and non-negotiable commitment to dismantling these exclusions, rather than inadvertently replicating them in new institutional forms.

The Concept of Deschooling

Ivan Illich's deschooling philosophy, articulated most fully in *Deschooling Society* (1971), begins from an observation about what schools actually do in modern societies, as distinct from what they claim to do. Illich observed that modern compulsory schooling has become the dominant institution through which societies define, control, and legitimise the very meaning of learning itself. By making school attendance compulsory and by tying social advancement to school-awarded credentials, modern societies had effectively created a situation in which any learning that did not happen within the school was considered informal, unofficial, and of lesser value. The rich informal learning embedded in families, communities, workplaces, and everyday social life had been systematically devalued and delegitimised.

This process, Illich argued, had deeply damaging consequences for individuals and for society as a whole. At the individual level, it created what he called learned helplessness — a condition in which people ceased to trust their own capacity to learn from life and became dependent on institutional instruction for any knowledge they considered legitimate. Children who had grown up learning practical and social knowledge within their communities were taught to regard this knowledge as worthless compared to the certified content dispensed by the school. Their own curiosity, creativity, and capacity for self-directed learning were progressively undermined by the school's insistence that knowledge must be packaged, delivered, and validated by an institutional authority (Illich, 1971).

Illich did not advocate for ignorance. He called for the liberation of learning from institutional captivity. He proposed replacing compulsory schools with what he called learning webs — informal, flexible networks through which people of all ages could connect with educational resources, skilled peers, and opportunities for meaningful practice, driven by genuine curiosity rather than compulsory attendance. In this vision, learning would be self-directed and lifelong, woven into the texture of everyday community life, rather than age-segregated, institution-bound, and credential-oriented.

Illich's ideas have found powerful contemporary expression in several educational movements and policy developments. The global home education movement, which encompasses millions of families across the United States, United Kingdom, India, and beyond, directly embodies Illich's vision of learning freed from institutional compulsion. The Swaraj University model in Udaipur, India — a self-directed learning community where students design their own learning journeys without formal curricula or examinations — is a direct application of deschooling principles in an Indian context. At the policy level, UNESCO's Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework and India's National Education Policy 2020, with its emphasis on flexible, multidisciplinary, and vocational learning pathways, reflect the growing mainstream recognition of the very insights that Illich articulated five decades ago (Singh & Dey, 2021).

Comparative Analysis: Areas Of Convergence

Experiential and Holistic Learning

Perhaps the deepest point of convergence between the Gurukul system and deschooling philosophy is their shared commitment to experiential learning — the understanding that genuine knowledge arises primarily from direct, purposeful engagement with the world, rather than from the passive reception of abstracted information. In the Gurukul, this was not a pedagogical theory but a lived reality: students learned about agriculture by working in the fields, they learned governance by observing the Guru's interactions with the wider community,

and they learned philosophy through extended, probing dialogue and sustained personal reflection. Knowledge was something to be lived and tested in daily experience, not memorised and recalled on demand.

Ivan Illich articulated a strikingly parallel vision. He argued that the most valuable and durable learning has always happened not in classrooms but in real contexts — in workshops and markets, in households and fields, in the informal conversations and collaborative problem-solving that characterise genuine community life. Contemporary evidence supports this position strongly. The Rishi Valley School, which operates on Krishnamurti's principles of holistic and nature-embedded learning, has consistently produced students with strong capacities for independent thinking and self-direction, despite — or perhaps because of — its deliberate departure from mainstream competitive schooling norms. Similarly, research on project-based learning models in diverse international contexts has demonstrated that students who learn through real-world projects show higher levels of conceptual understanding, motivation, and transferable skill development than those taught through conventional didactic methods (Kumar, 2005; Illich, 1971).

The Teacher as Guide and Moral Exemplar

Both the Gurukul tradition and deschooling philosophy fundamentally challenge the conventional model of the teacher as the sole authority and source of legitimate knowledge. In the Gurukul, the Guru's authority derived from the depth and authenticity of his own learning and the quality of his character. He was understood not primarily as an instructor who delivered content but as a living model of the values, wisdom, and practices that education sought to cultivate. His central task was not to fill the student's mind with information but to create the conditions — through example, through dialogue, through the demanding yet nurturing environment of the ashram — in which the student's own intelligence, character, and sense of purpose could grow organically (Pathak, 2013).

Illich's vision of the educational relationship is remarkably consonant with this. He proposed that the role of the teacher in a deschooled society should be that of a facilitator or resource person rather than an authority figure — someone who helps learners identify the resources and connections they need to pursue their own genuinely motivated inquiries. This model is increasingly visible in contemporary educational innovation. The teacher-facilitator model is central to democratic schools such as Summerhill in the UK and Sudbury Valley in the USA, where students direct their own learning and teachers serve primarily as mentors and guides. In India, the Digantar school in Rajasthan operates on similar principles, with teachers trained explicitly to facilitate inquiry-based learning rather than to transmit prescribed content.

Community as the Medium of Education

A third major point of convergence lies in the role both traditions assign to the community in the educational process. In modern institutional schooling, the community — the family, the neighbourhood, the local economy and culture — is largely excluded from the formal educational process. Both the Gurukul and deschooling theory reject this separation as impoverishing and counterproductive. In the Gurukul, the community was not a backdrop to education but its very medium. Students absorbed the values, practices, and social knowledge of their community through daily participation in the life of the ashram and its wider social network. Illich's learning webs were similarly community-centred, proposing that education should be reconnected to the real social, economic, and cultural life of communities, drawing on the knowledge and skills of community members — craftspeople, farmers, artists, elders — as primary educational resources (Kumar, 2005).

This community-centred model of education is visible in several contemporary initiatives that have drawn on these principles in practice. The Eklavya Foundation in Madhya Pradesh, India, has worked for decades to develop community-based science and mathematics education that connects school learning to the lived realities of rural and tribal communities, with documented improvements in student engagement, attendance, and comprehension. In a broader international context, the Finnish education system's emphasis on community involvement, teacher autonomy, and reduced standardised testing — widely regarded as among the most successful in the world — reflects many of the same principles that both the Gurukul tradition and deschooling theory embody.

Flexibility, Individualisation, and Learner-Centredness

Both the Gurukul system and deschooling philosophy share a strong resistance to the imposition of a standardised, uniform curriculum on all learners. In the Gurukul, the pace, emphasis, and content of each student’s education were shaped by the Guru’s intimate knowledge of that individual student’s character, capacities, and emerging purposes. In deschooling theory, the learner’s own curiosity and self-identified needs are the primary organising principle of education. India’s National Education Policy 2020 explicitly acknowledges the importance of flexible, multidisciplinary learning pathways and the reduction of rigid curriculum boundaries — a policy direction that directly echoes the principles of both traditions discussed in this paper, suggesting that their insights are increasingly being recognised at the level of national educational policy (Singh & Dey, 2021).

Table 1. Comparative Overview of the Gurukul System and Deschooling Philosophy

Dimension	Gurukul System	Deschooling Philosophy
Learning Approach	Experiential and holistic	Self-directed and autonomous
Role of Teacher	Guru as guide and mentor	Facilitator, not authority
Location	Forest or community ashram	Society as learning space
Curriculum	Flexible, learner-centred	No fixed curriculum
Assessment	Practical demonstration	Mastery-based, not exams
Values Emphasis	Dharma, ethics, character	Personal freedom, social equity
Community Role	Central – village and guru family	Central – peer networks

Points Of Divergence

A balanced and intellectually honest comparison of the Gurukul system and deschooling philosophy must acknowledge the significant differences between them. These differences reflect deep divergences in historical context, social vision, and ethical orientation that cannot be glossed over in the interest of a tidy argument for synthesis.

The most serious and consequential difference concerns social inclusion and equity. The Gurukul system, as it was historically practised, was a deeply exclusionary institution. Access to formal Gurukul education was largely restricted to boys from the upper castes — the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya varnas. Women faced systematic exclusion from formal Gurukul learning in the vast majority of cases. The classical texts of the Manusmriti explicitly prohibited women and Shudras from studying the Vedas, and while individual exceptions such as the philosopher Gargi are celebrated in the tradition, they were genuinely exceptional and in no way representative of the norm. Members of the Shudra caste and Dalit communities faced even more absolute exclusion, enforced by religious sanction and severe social punishment. The consequences of this exclusion were not merely educational but profoundly social: generations of women and lower-caste individuals were denied not only access to formal knowledge but also the social mobility, civic participation, and personal dignity that education makes possible (Pathak, 2013; Nanda, 2016).

These exclusions were structural, not incidental. They were built into the philosophical foundations of the caste system and legitimised by the religious authority of the Brahminical tradition. Any romanticisation of the Gurukul system that fails to reckon seriously with this history is both intellectually dishonest and potentially dangerous, particularly in a contemporary Indian context where caste-based discrimination in access to education remains a documented and ongoing reality. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Right to Education Act, 2009, represent legislative responses to precisely these kinds of

historically entrenched exclusions. A reformed educational model that draws on Gurukul principles must therefore build in explicit and robust mechanisms for ensuring universal access, with particular attention to historically excluded groups.

Deschooling philosophy, by contrast, is explicitly and fundamentally egalitarian in its orientation. Illich's critique of compulsory schooling was directed precisely at its role in reproducing and legitimising social inequality. His proposed alternative — open, community-based learning webs accessible to all — was designed to democratise access to knowledge and skill, breaking down the barriers of class, credential, and institutional gatekeeping. However, it must also be noted that Illich's deschooling vision carries its own practical challenges. Critics have pointed out that in societies characterised by deep structural inequalities, the removal of compulsory schooling without the provision of genuinely accessible alternatives could simply disadvantage those who most need institutional support — particularly children from poor families who lack the social capital, cultural resources, and parental availability to navigate self-directed learning environments effectively (Kumar, 2005).

A second important difference lies in the nature of authority. The Gurukul placed enormous personal authority in the hands of the individual Guru, essentially unquestioned and unchecked by external standards. While this authority was typically exercised with genuine concern for the student's wellbeing, its unchecked nature also created real risks of exploitation and abuse, which historical records do document in some cases. Illich's vision, by contrast, was fundamentally suspicious of concentrated educational authority in any form and placed the autonomy and self-direction of the individual learner at the centre of the educational process. A synthesis of the two traditions would therefore need to find a careful balance between the relational depth and personal mentorship that the Gurukul tradition valued and the institutional safeguards and learner autonomy that deschooling theory demands.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper reveals a remarkable and largely unexplored structural affinity between two educational traditions that arose in very different historical and cultural contexts. The Gurukul system of ancient India and Ivan Illich's deschooling philosophy share a set of foundational convictions about the nature of genuine learning and the conditions under which it flourishes. Both treat the living, experienced world as the primary curriculum. Both understand the teacher as a guide, mentor, and moral exemplar rather than an institutional authority. Both place the community at the heart of the educational process. And both are deeply sceptical of the reduction of learning to standardised, certifiable outcomes.

These shared features reflect a convergent insight about the fundamental nature of human learning — arrived at independently across vastly different centuries and cultures — that human beings learn most effectively when they are genuinely motivated, when their learning is connected to real experience and real social relationships, and when they are treated as individuals with unique capacities rather than as interchangeable units to be processed through a uniform system. The real-world examples discussed in this paper — Visva-Bharati, Rishi Valley School, Swaraj University, Digantar, and the Eklavya Foundation — demonstrate that this insight is not merely theoretical but is being successfully applied in diverse educational contexts across India today.

For contemporary education policy, this convergence carries significant implications. India's National Education Policy 2020 represents a potentially important step in the direction suggested by both traditions: its emphasis on holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and vocational learning pathways; its recognition of non-formal and informal learning; its stress on mother-tongue-based instruction; and its call for reduced emphasis on high-stakes examinations all echo the principles of both the Gurukul tradition and deschooling philosophy. However, the NEP's implementation remains uneven, and there is a real risk that its progressive principles will be absorbed into the existing institutional framework without the structural changes in teacher training, assessment philosophy, and community involvement that would be needed to realise them fully. The insights of both traditions suggest that genuine educational reform requires not merely curricular adjustment but a fundamental rethinking of the purposes and structures of schooling itself.

At the same time, the divergences and challenges identified in this paper serve as essential cautions. Any educational model that draws on the Gurukul tradition must build in explicit, robust, and institutionally enforced

commitments to universal access and the active inclusion of historically excluded groups — women, Dalit communities, tribal communities, and economically marginalised families. And any model that draws on deschooling principles must ensure that the removal of institutional structures is accompanied by the provision of genuinely accessible alternatives, so that the freedom of self-directed learning does not become, in practice, the freedom only of those who are already privileged.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the ancient Indian Gurukul system and Ivan Illich's deschooling philosophy share a remarkable set of foundational principles, despite their vastly different origins in time, place, and cultural tradition. Both traditions privilege experiential learning over passive instruction; both understand the teacher as a guide and facilitator rather than an authority and examiner; both embed education firmly within the life of the community; and both insist on flexibility, individualisation, and genuine respect for the learner's own intelligence and interests. Real-world educational initiatives — from Tagore's Visva-Bharati and Krishnamurti's Rishi Valley School to Swaraj University and the Eklavya Foundation — demonstrate that these principles are not utopian ideals but practically realised educational possibilities.

A hybrid educational model that draws thoughtfully and critically on both traditions — retaining the Gurukul's emphasis on character formation, mentorship, and integrated knowledge, while incorporating deschooling's commitment to equity, individual autonomy, and universal access — could offer a genuinely transformative alternative to the limitations of contemporary mainstream schooling. The connections to India's National Education Policy 2020 suggest that the policy environment is becoming more receptive to such ideas, though realising their full potential will require implementation that goes well beyond superficial curricular reform. The historical exclusions of the Gurukul system must be confronted directly and comprehensively, ensuring that its pedagogical strengths are made available to all learners regardless of gender, caste, class, or social background.

Future research should move beyond the conceptual analysis undertaken here toward primary empirical investigation. Qualitative case studies of institutions such as Visva-Bharati, Rishi Valley School, Swaraj University, and Digantar — exploring the experiences of students, teachers, and community members through in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and participatory research methods — would provide the field-based evidence needed to assess the real-world viability, challenges, and outcomes of education models grounded in these traditions. Comparative studies across different social and regional contexts in India would be particularly valuable in understanding how these models interact with the structural inequalities of caste, gender, and class that any genuine education reform must address.

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