

## In Search of Employment: A Study of Labour Migration from Dhemaji and Lakhimpur Districts of Assam

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*How to cite this article:*

Lahan, Ratul Kumar. 2024. 'In Search of Employment: A Study of Labour Migration from Dhemaji and Lakhimpur Districts of Assam'. *Sampratyaya*, 1(Spl. Issue, No-2): 34-46.

DOI: 10.21276/smprt.202408.1sne2.a4

### Abstract

In the changing socio-economic scenario of the rural areas of Assam, migration, particularly labour migration, happens to be a common phenomenon; it involves both economic benefits and cost. The present study attempts to explore the issue of labour migration from Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. These two districts are less developed in the state and are flood-prone. In the districts, the main occupation is agriculture which is highly susceptible to flood risk. In view of this, the study is conducted after the floods of 2018 and 2019 to explore the trend and impact of labour migration on household income. It was found that among the surveyed households, 30.96 per cent have at least one migrant worker. The preferred destination for the migrant worker from these two districts is Kerala. The average duration of stay in the destination is 40.24 months. The range of annual income of migrant workers is between ₹202737.00 and ₹840000.00. The average annual migrant remittance in the surveyed households is recorded ₹130163.90.

**Keywords:** Migration, Livelihood, Occupational Diversification, Flood

### 1.0 Introduction

Labour migration is basic human nature since the beginning of civilisation. People in region with unsecure and unsustainable livelihood options migrate to regions with secure, sustainable, and wide range of livelihood alternatives. The livelihood of rural people, especially the poor, has been changing significantly after independence due to development interventions (Swargiary & Mahanta 2020). The change, however, has brought in some negative dynamics (Prakash 2019 and Bardhan 1990:5). One of such dynamics is variability in income flow. The rural households are exposed to two evils - one is poverty and the other is income variability. While there are opportunities in rural areas created through

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development interventions there are also threats of poverty and income variability among households. In other words, development interventions—various schemes for example— have created hopes and aspirations through opportunities, they have not been able to uproot rural poverty and ensure income equality (*see* Deshpande & Shah 2009).

Rural poverty is evident as low-income earners are living in rural areas and their primary source of livelihood is agriculture (ICAR 2011). The agriculture based livelihood in developing countries exhibits shift towards non-farm livelihood activities, which is expected to be more sustainable and beneficial. Nevertheless, in India agriculture sector is not developed in rural areas to employ its available workforce. Lack of employment generating assets, absence of non-farm sector and low skill endowment are normal scenario in rural areas in many parts of the country (cf. Haas 2021). Under this situation, the rural poor often choose to migrate to other areas where the employment opportunity is high and matching to their skill. This is the general cause of migration, which is theorised in terms of push and pull factors (Lee 1966).

Push factors like poverty and unemployment are characteristics of rural agricultural sector (Prakash 2019). Along with bad policy of the government (*ibid.*:8), natural calamities, climatic change, and people's low capability contribute to rural poverty, inequality and unemployment. Natural calamities devastate rural economy in general and agricultural sector in particular in several states like Assam. The agriculture sector of this state is prone to severe adversities like flood havocs, lack of organised market and credit, traditional technologies, frequent crop failure, etc. Due to these adversities, the livelihood of rural calamity-prone people has become unsustainable. In order to escape from the situation of uncertainty, poverty, and unemployment, several households are adopting non-farm and off farm economic activities through government schemes, but diversification of livelihood pursuits has not been found adequate to absorb all the unemployed workforce gainfully. In recent years, migration of people from rural Assam in search of alternative source of livelihood has become a frequently sought livelihood strategy. The trend is high in the areas where crop failure is very common due to annual flood. The people migrate to developed states and even to urban areas of Assam. Therefore, it is important to analyse the pattern and direction of out migration from the study area.

### **1.1 Migration as Alternative Rural Livelihood Strategy**

Labour migration, particularly rural and urban migration in a country, has been a strategy of enlarging livelihood options since a long time on the face of rural poverty and unemployment (*see* Lee 1966). The migration has a mutually reciprocal effect. The rural and urban areas of developing countries are interrelated with each other via migration flows (Harris & Todaro 1970). Development of rural areas is largely dependent upon the trends and directions of labour migration to the developed regions. The spread of technology, skills and products to rural areas happen through the migrant workers. Rural areas provide market for some urban products. In addition, development of urban areas and industries conversely depend on labour supply from rural areas. Hence, it is important to know the trend and pattern of migrant labourers vis-a-vis their work and income in the destination.

Labour migration has become crucial in recent times due to various reasons. Since the opening up of the economy, the topic of labour migration has become one of the major concerns in social science research. In the present scenario of a globalised economy, the pace and scope of outward migration are increasing day by day. Better road infrastructure,

improved transportation and enhanced mobile connectivity have facilitated this increase in the volume of migration (Access Development Services 2015). For the poor and landless labourers, migration becomes one of the commonly adopted livelihood diversification strategies (Basant et al. 1998).

The main reason behind labour migration is the unsustainable nature of the primary sector (Abdulai & Crole-Rees 2001). The performance of the agriculture sector is declining globally. The production from the sector as well as employment generation in the sector has been declining. It is evident from the data of developing countries that agriculture-dependent livelihood becomes unsustainable day by day. Therefore, the agriculture-dependent people of rural calamity prone areas seek alternative and supplementary earning opportunities to compensate for the losses of the agricultural sector (Velluva 2004). In the absence of proper industrialisation and the absence of a well-developed labour market, the best non-farm economic activity people engage in is migration towards developed regions within or outside of their native territory. Thus, migration becomes the easiest escape route for the poverty-stricken people of underdeveloped regions (Zhang & Song 2003).

## **1.2 Research Problem, Area, and Planning of the Study**

This section presents a brief account of the research problem, area of study, objectives, hypotheses to be tested and methodology as well.

The disaster-bred agrarian crisis of Assam along with the slow pace of industrialisation and the mere absence of job opportunities in the tertiary sector within the state force the rural unemployed youth to migrate towards the developed region of the country especially Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana and New Delhi. The situation is more acute in the study area i.e. Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam. In the complete absence of the industrial sector in the district until the last decade, farming was the main occupation of the people of the district. But due to recurrent flood and flood induced sand deposition its fertile land has become uncultivable. Agriculture, which was the main sector of rural employment, no more guarantees work. The industrial and tertiary sectors are not developed enough to absorb unemployed people from agricultural sector. As a result, unemployed people from both districts start migrating. The situation is more serious in the flood-affected villages of the study area. For some of the family, migration remittances constitute the central component of household income.

Migration to urban and industrial areas fulfils the requirement of labour demand and thus has forward linkage. At the same time it has backward linkage as it ensures assured earning of households through remittances and thus reducing income variability. Again, the migrated labour with proper training and attitude in the destination build up capacities having the potentialities of organising economic activities in rural areas after returning to the native Place (Wouterse & Taylor 2007). However, migration entails cost (Lagakos et al. 2020). The whole process of migration involves economic as well as non-economic costs. The cost associated with the migration process is transportation cost, the maintenance cost of migrants until s(he) establishes at the destination, sacrifice involved in the diversion of migrant's time away from household production activities, etc. It also entails the risk that the migrant may fail to find work and send remittances to the family. Cost and risks increase as the distance between the native place and destination increases.

The study area i.e. Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts are two of the backward districts of Assam having agriculture as the only available economic activity in the rural areas. However, flood damages just before the field study in during 2019-2020 in both districts ruined the household economy of the study area. As a result, the unemployed youth of the area are forced to migrate to other developed states of the country mainly to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka. Though migration provides a secured amount of income in terms of migration remittances, it also involves a certain amount of cost and sacrifices for the migrants and their households. A cost-benefit analysis of labour outmigration is useful to formulate policy and rules regarding labour migration. Besides, such a study can provide nature and extent of relation between migration and livelihood diversification.

### ***1.2.1 Objectives***

In order to study about labour out migration from the study area and to find determinants of migration following objectives are constructed:

- (i) To study the trends and direction of migration from Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts.
- (ii) To assess migration remittances received by the families and compare households income of families with migrated labour and families with no migrated labour.

### ***1.2.2 Hypothesis***

The hypothesis considered for the study are-

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no significant difference in percapita household income of the families with migrated labour with other families.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is significant difference in percapita household income of the families with migrated labour with other families.

### ***1.2.3 Methodology***

The study is based on primary and secondary sources of data. For primary data field work was conducted between 2019 and 2020. The study is conducted in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts, which are the two highly, flood affected districts of Assam. There are nine and five development blocks in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts respectively. The sample size for the study was 394. For comparative analysis of household income of families with migrated labour and households with no migrated labour, data from such families were also collected.

To meet the first objective, descriptive statistics are used. Tables represent the trend and pattern of labour out-migration.

To compare income of families with migrated labour and families with no migrated labour t-test is used.

## **1.3 Findings of the Study**

Migration in most of the cases is an economic phenomenon, where a person unable to earn a better livelihood searches for income earning opportunities in some other places. In Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam, unemployed youths migrate to other states in search of job opportunities and higher income. Migration from this region of the state can be analysed as a livelihood option rather than any social issue.

### 1.3.1 Livelihood Pattern in the Study Area

The livelihood pattern of the study area is agriculture based; more precisely paddy dependent. Paddy grown during the summer season of the year is not only the principal crop of the people, but it is also the major source of their income. Livestock rearing is an allied but the most sought livelihood activities in the study area. People engage themselves in piggeries and goateris. In recent years, youths are attracted towards livestock rearing in a commercial way. In addition to these livelihood activities, people earn their livelihood from petty vending and wage labour. Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts are industrially backward.

**Table 1: Principal Occupation of the Head of the Households**

Nature of Areas	Principal Occupation	District		Total
		Dhemaji	Lakhimpur	
Flood Affected	Paddy Cultivation	38	44	82
	Cash Crop	9	8	17
	Livestock Rearing	10	3	13
	Petty Vending	34	13	47
	Non Industrial Wage Labour	19	23	42
	Industrial Wage Labour	40	32	72
	Other Activities	13	9	22
	Total	163	132	295
Flood Free	Paddy Cultivation	17	7	24
	Cash Crop	17	10	27
	Livestock Rearing	3	0	3
	Petty Vending	4	8	12
	Non Industrial Wage Labour	7	9	16
	Industrial Wage Labour	1	5	6
	Other Activities	6	5	11
	Total	55	44	99
All Area	Paddy Cultivation	55	51	106
	Cash Crop	26	18	44
	Livestock Rearing	13	3	16
	Petty Vending	38	21	59
	Non Industrial Wage Labour	26	32	58
	Industrial Wage Labour	41	37	78
	Other Activities	19	14	33
	Total	218	176	394

*Source:* Field Survey

### 1.3.2 Principal Occupation of the Head of the Households

Paddy cultivation is the principal occupation for 106 (26.90 per cent) heads of the households (table 1) calculated on the basis of 183 working days in a year. This is followed by industrial wage labour (19.80 per cent), petty vending (14.97 per cent) and non-industrial wage labour (14.72 per cent). In the flood affected areas paddy cultivation is more dominant than in the flood free areas. In the flood-affected areas, 27.79 per cent heads of the household have paddy cultivation as their principal occupation while in flood free areas only 24.24 per cent

heads of the household adopt paddy cultivation as principal occupation. In the flood-free areas, cash cropping is the dominant principal occupation as 27.27 per cent head of the household have adopted this occupation. Another important finding of the study is that, “migration” as an occupation is highly accepted by the people of flood-affected areas, while the importance of migrated labour as principal occupation in the flood-free areas is comparatively less.

### 1.3.3 Income Statistics of the Study Area

This sub-section analyses the annual household income and annual per capita income of the households. The average annual household income of the families of the study area is ₹ 189593.91, while the median income is ₹147500.00. The household with the annual income of ₹ 10000.00 in a year is the poorest while the richest among the studied household earns ₹ 892500.00 per annum.

Table 2 shows composition of households’ income according to the sources of income.

In the flood affected areas, as it is evident from the table 2, the share of remittances sent by the out migrants in the total households’ income of the families is the highest. It is followed by petty vending (15.12 per cent) and paddy cultivation (11.27 per cent). On the contrary, in the flood free areas majority of the households’ income comes from cash cropping (30.11 per cent) which is followed by other activities (17.06 per cent) and paddy cultivation (16.17 per cent). For the study area as a whole migration remittance contributes the highest share (33.11 per cent) to the households’ income, which is followed by other activities (13.76 per cent) and petty vending (13.66 per cent).

**Table 2:** Composition of Household Income as per Sources of Income

Source of Income	Flood Affected		Flood Free		Total	
	Income (₹)	Share (%)	Income (₹)	Share (%)	Income (₹)	Share (%)
Paddy Cultivation	21503.73	11.27	30081.82	16.17	23659.14	12.48
Cash Cropping	14779.32	7.75	56022.22	30.11	25142.39	13.26
Livestock	10694.92	5.61	12206.06	6.56	11074.62	5.84
Petty Vending	28847.46	15.12	17080.81	9.18	25890.86	13.66
Non Industrial Wage Labour	14397.29	7.55	16656.57	8.95	14964.97	7.89
Migrant Remittances	76372.88	40.03	22262.63	11.97	62776.65	33.11
Others	24188.48	12.68	31737.37	17.06	26085.28	13.76
Total	190784.08	100.00	186047.48	100.00	189593.91	100.00

**Source:** Field Survey

These results show that despite being two most paddy dominant districts of Assam, people of the study area are either encouraged to choose or forced to choose other activities for their livelihood. The household survey finds that unemployed youths of the rural areas are forced to migrate to other developed states in search of jobs due to frequent crop failure caused by flood and sand deposition in crop fields. In the study area other than migrant

**Table 3:** Descriptive Statistics of Income of According to Income Sources in(₹)

Statistics	Paddy Cultivation	Cash Cropping	Livestock	Petty Vending	Non-Industrial Wage Labour	Migrant Labour	Others	
Number of Households	335	228	253	135	101	122	168	
Mean	27825.97	43447.81	17246.64	75562.96	58378.22	202737.70	61176.19	
Minimum	2500.00	2000.00	1200.00	3000.00	2000.00	12000.00	5000.00	
Maximum	140000.00	380000.00	120000.00	600000.00	150000.00	840000.00	348000.00	
Percentiles	25	12000.00	12000.00	11500.00	26000.00	24000.00	127500.00	22500.00
	50	22500.00	24000.00	14000.00	48000.00	50000.00	180000.00	49000.00
	75	36000.00	48750.00	21500.00	70000.00	87000.00	240000.00	72000.00

*Source:* Field Survey

remittances, no other activities could provide sufficient and sustainable income to the poor families. Dependence on farm activities in the flood-affected area is an extremely risky livelihood strategy. Therefore, youths in the flood-affected area prefer other activities in developed states of the country. The share of remittances in the household income in flood-affected area is the highest (40 per cent) while the shares of paddy cultivation and cash cropping are in the lower side. On the contrary, cash cropping and paddy cultivation are less risk-prone in the flood free areas and they constitute a larger part of the households' total income. The share of migrant remittances in the total income in the flood free areas is significantly less than that in flood-affected area. Thus, the reason behind higher income in the flood affected area than in the flood free area is the out-migration of youths and resulting remittances to their place of origin. In last few years, people find employment and earning opportunities in construction of roads, bridge and other infrastructural projects. It is the reason behind significant share of income coming from wage labour and other activities.

As we have discussed, the households, which have migrant workers, earn more income in the form of migrant remittances. On the contrary, the households with more dominance on paddy cultivation earn less income. Table 3 shows the income statistics by activity. The study finds that total 335 households are engaged in paddy cultivation and their average earnings from paddy cultivation are ₹27, 856 only whereas 122 households have migrant labourers and their average earnings in a year are ₹202,738. Similarly, the average annual income earned from cash cropping, livestock rearing, petty vending and daily wage are ₹43,448, ₹17,247, ₹75,563 and ₹58,378 respectively.

Thus, migrant remittances occupy a significant portion of household income in the study area. The study of livelihood of the study area therefore requires some insight of the migration from rural areas. A study of the nature, trend and pattern shall help in understanding the livelihood strategy of the people. Among the surveyed households, 122 households have at least one migrant worker (i.e. 30.96 per cent of the total households). The most preferred destination of migrant workers is Kerala<sup>1</sup>, which is followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The direct railway connectivity between Dibrugarh<sup>2</sup> and various cities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu encourages the workers to migrate in search of employment avenues. Moreover, the easy availability of works in the destination also acts as a factor in choosing the destination. The workers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are mostly employed in rubber industries or few are working as security guard in offices and hotels. Workers migrating to Arunachal Pradesh are employed in construction of ongoing hydroelectric power project. Table 4 shows destination wise composition of migrant workers.

The average duration of stay in the destination by migrant workers is 40.24 months. The minimum duration of staying is three months while maximum duration is 15 years. Out of 122 migrant workers, 17 workers have been staying for more than 10 years, while 20 migrant workers have been staying for less than one year.

It is already stated that a significant share of household income comes as remittances. The average annual income the migrant workers earn in the destination is ₹ 202737.7 with minimum of ₹ 10000.00 and maximum of ₹ 840000.00. The migrant workers remitted a portion of their earnings to their families. The average annual migrant remittance in the surveyed



**Table 4:** Destination of Migrant Workers

Destination	Number of Workers	Percentage
Kerala	79	64.74
Karnataka	10	8.2
Arunachal Pradesh	10	8.2
Tamil Nadu	7	5.74
Abroad <sup>3</sup>	5	4.10
Within the State <sup>4</sup>	5	4.10
Maharashtra	3	2.46
Mizoram	2	1.64
Gujarat	1	0.82
Total	122	100

*Source:* Field Survey

**Table 5:** Socio-economic characteristics of migrated labourers

Socio-economic Characteristics	Number of migrants (percentage)
<b>Age</b>	
15-25 years	15(12.30)
25-35 years	39 (31.96)
35-45 years	57 (46.72)
45 years and above	11 (9.02)
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	39 (31.97)
Unmarried	83 (68.03)
<b>Family Size</b>	
3	12 (9.84)
4	16 (13.11)
5	27 (22.13)
6	41 (33.61)
7 and above	26 (21.31)
<b>Level of Education</b>	
Up to Primary	329 (26.23)
Up to HSLC	49(40.16)
Up to HS	26 (21.31)
Graduate	13 (10.66)
Post-graduate and above	2 (1.64)
<b>Land Holding Size</b>	
0-5 bighas	24 (19.67)
5-10 bighas	67 (54.92)
10-15 bighas	23 (18.85)
15 bighas and above	8 (6.56)

*Source:* Field Survey

households is ₹ 130163.9 with maximum of ₹ 600000.00 annually and minimum of ₹ 6000.00 annually. It is observed that the migrant workers remit their income mostly on quarterly basis.

Some reverse migrants have also been found in the study area. The migrants have returned to their native place and have started some unconventional works like setting up fast food shop, working as security guard in their locality, etc.

### ***1.3.4 Background of Migrant Labourers***

Understanding the socio-economic backgrounds of migrated labourers give a picture of pull and push factors behind the decision to migrate. Table 5 provides the socio-economic characteristics of migrated labourers.

From table 5 it is clear that, most of the migrated people are youths. More than half of the migrated workers are in the age group of 35-45 years, whereas the number of migrant labourers above 45 years is below 10.0 per cent. Most of the migrant labourers are unmarried (68.03 per cent). Similarly, families with larger family size have more migrant labourers. Families with smaller landholdings have the tendency to migrate to other states. In the study area, 54.92 per cent of migrant households have landholding size of 5-10 bighas. Importantly, most of their landholdings are prone to annual flood. As a result, they are forced to migrate in search of livelihood.

### ***1.3.5 Income Statistics of Migrated Households***

Better income is one of the most influential factors in migration decision. People from the study area migrated to other states of the country mainly in search of jobs with higher and assured income. The households with migrated labourers earn more than the households with no migrated labourers. Table 6 shows income statistics of the households with migrant labourers.

**Table 6:** Income Statistics of Households with Migrated Labourers

Income Range (in ₹) (Annual)	Number of Labourers
Less than 100000.00	7
100000.00 – 200000.00	16
200000.00 -300000.00	36
300000.00 – 400000.00	21
400000.00 – 500000.00	22
500000.00 – 600000.00	11
700000.00 – 800000.00	7
800000.00 and above	2

**Source:** Field Survey

From table 6 it is clear that migrant labourers earn significantly better income in the destination. Almost all the migrant labourers earn more than ₹ 1, 000, 00.00 per annum. The average annual income the migrant workers earn in the destination is ₹ 202737.7 with minimum

of ₹ 10000.00 and maximum of ₹ 840000.00. The migrant workers remitted a portion of their earnings to their families. The average annual migrant remittance in the surveyed households is ₹ 130163.9 with maximum of ₹ 600000.00 annually and minimum of ₹ 6000.00 annually.

**1.3.6 Comparison of Income between Households with and without Migrated Labourers**

Migrated labourers play an important role in the economic conditions of the households. The income of households with migrant labourers is significantly higher than the households with no migrant labourers. The result of t-test (table 7) confirms our findings.

The table indicates that a household with migrated labour earns more than the households without migrated labour. The average annual income of households with migrated labourer is ₹262737.7, which is higher by ₹150287.34 than the households with no migrated labourers. The difference in annual household income between these two groups of households is statistically significant ( $t = 3.090, p = 0.002$ ). Hence, the null hypothesis considered for the study is rejected.

**Table 7:** Comparison of Mean Household Income between Household with Migrated Labourer and without Migrated Labourer

	Nature of Households	Number of Households	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean	t statistic
Mean Household Income	With Migrated Labourers	122	262737.7	41007.3	0.0502	t = 3.090 p = 0.002
	Without Migrated Labourer	272	112450.36	12001.62	0.0600	
	Total	394	189593.91	6784.27	0.0410	

**Source:** Calculated by the author from field data

**Table 8:** Remittances Received by the Households

Remittances (in ₹) (Annual)	Number of Households
Less than 100000.00	28
100000.00 – 200000.00	22
200000.00 – 300000.00	38
300000.00 – 400000.00	11
400000.00 – 500000.00	14
500000.00 – 600000.00	9

**Source:** Field Survey

**1.3.7 Migrants’ Remittances**

One of the important motives behind labour migration is to provide financial support to the family. To sustain a livelihood people migrate to other states and earn income. Almost all migrant labourers remit a certain portion of their income to their families. As in most cases, employers provide the labourers with food and shelter, so they can remit significant portion of

their income to their families. Table 8 shows the migrant remittances received by the studied households.

From table 7 it is clear that most of the migrant labourers remit sufficient amount of fund to their families. The average annual remittance by a migrant is ₹191024.00. Twenty-three are able to remit more than ₹ 400000.00 per annum. The frequency of remittances is mostly quarterly. Very few migrants remit monthly.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

People of the study area migrate to developed states of the country in search of jobs mainly in the industrial sector. In the last two decades, the volume of out-migration has increased and accordingly share of remittances in the family income back home has increased. However, there are certain institutional and other hindrances in the process of migration. The cost factors involved in migration are not incorporated in the work for which further study may be undertaken. Migrant labourers are still not getting adequate information about the process. The governments as well as local administration should facilitate the outbound and incoming migrant labourers. Moreover, no record is kept or no registration is maintained about the migrants which creates uncertainties and fear among the families. Therefore, the authority has the responsibility to make proper arrangements to support the workers migrating to other states and returning to their locality.

#### Notes

1. The first migrants are motivating factors of subsequent migrations form an area to a particular destination. A type of social network of migrants and potential migrants is established (see Reja and Das 2019).
2. Dibrugarh is the major railway station nearest to the study area from where direct trains are available to South Inida. Railway line connecting Dibrugarh and Rangiya Junction on Guwahati-Delhi and Guwahati-South India passes through these two districts. Bogibill Bridge over the Brahmaputra has connected this area with Dibrugarh by road.
3. The destinations abroad are Israel, UAE and Malaysia.
4. Guwahati is the popular destination of workers from these two districts within Assam.

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