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Hindu Nationalism And The Political Mobilization Of Non-Dominant Castes In Uttar Pradesh: A Study From 1990 To 2022

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Abstract

The paper studies the political mobilization of other backward classes that are non-Yadav and those that are non-Jatav scheduled castes. In the process, it analyses the role of Hindu nationalist groups in Uttar Pradesh between the years of 1990-2022. It finds that the political mobilization did not happen immediately and was not pre-ordained. The paper identifies two important points – first, at two different time frames, Hindu groups were outperformed by the caste formations in terms of mobilization at the state level. Second, the realignment that took place in the year of 2014 was not simply due to one factor but rather came as a result of different systems and factors coming together. The paper makes the comparison between the three systems and thus establishes the impact of what had been happening previously.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Bharatiya Janata Party, non-dominant castes, OBC politics, Dalit politics, Uttar Pradesh, Hindutva, social engineering.

1. INTRODUCTION

After 1990, Uttar Pradesh's caste-political landscape was reshaped dramatically. The Mandal Commission's OBC quotas and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement brought forth the challenging Mandal (caste-based) and Mandir (religion-based) politics, which are identified by many scholars as the beginning of the modern era (Hasan, 1998; Jaffrelot, 2003). In the following years, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) established solid Yadav-OBC and Dalit bases respectively, while the BJP was known to be dependent upon upper-castes and trading communities' support (Jaffrelot, 2003; Chandra, 2004).

However, this understanding has become difficult to uphold. Since 2014, the BJP has performed well in Uttar Pradesh elections thanks to the non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits that it has been able to attract from the ranks of the SP and BSP (Verniers, 2021; CSDS-Lokniti, 2017, 2019). That's why a vital empirical question appears: what means, institutional mechanisms, and ideologies have Hindu nationalist politics used to gain new support from castes that were not part of the coalition in the past?

The aim of this article is to determine whether the changes that occurred in Indian politics after 2014 are better analyzed in the following way: (a) via a material/patronage mechanism, which implies a systemized form of campaigning, along with the provision of welfare benefits that are established according to the

structures proposed by social engineering and patronage democracy, or (b) via an ideological/cultural mechanism, which means a proper recognition of cultural differences and incorporation of identities into the narrative of the Hindu nationalist ideology. The article distinguishes between the mechanisms mentioned above and the theory that compares the results achieved with the effects that result from applying the principle of anti-incumbency or the personality of the leader (the "Modi wave" effect).

The article is organized in four chronological sections: the Mandal-Mandir period (1990-1998), the electoral backwardness of the BJP and the rise of the BSP (1998-2007), the reconsolidation before the elections in 2014 (2007-2014) and the rise of the political system based on caste since 2014. "Non-dominant castes" is used in this paper to refer to the castes that have been in a subordinate position (compared to the larger groups of castes) within the OBC and Scheduled castes programs.

Uttar Pradesh is chosen as a representative case, due to the multiplicity of historical experiments and organizations which have existed in the state for a long time. In this regard, the fact that this state is the same place where Hindu nationalism faced its defeat in the elections (1993) and the characteristics of the experience that were confronted in 2007 provide a necessary explanation. It allows stating that Uttar Pradesh has become an ideal example for analyzing the context of the issue. Section 6.2 gives an example of West Bengal and focuses on the fact that the experience of Uttar Pradesh cannot be treated as unique but can be used to create a theory underlining why this experience has failed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Caste as Political Resource

According to Kothari (1970), caste is not just a static institution in India but has a lot of role to play in politics. Chandra (2004) provides a model called patronage-democracy which reframes the way caste voting is perceived, making it into a rational response that accounts for the distribution of resources from the state during elections.

2.2 Social Engineering: The Dominant Framework

The writings of Christophe Jaffrelot serve as the main framework that explains the activities of Hindu nationalism vis-a-vis the lower castes in North India. His works delve into the evolution of this movement and its ideological basis, covering the period from the 1920s to the time it entered electoral politics post-Independence (Jaffrelot, 1996). The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 posed a threat to the BJP's upper caste base, which led to the party inventing a strategy called social engineering whereby people from the neglected OBCs and Dalits were wooed by appealing to their resentment against dominating OBC groups like Yadavs and Jatavs (Jaffrelot, 2003). The study of OBCs in the Hindi heartland shows that the proportion of OBC politicians in Uttar Pradesh increased from 18% to 22% between 1991 and 1996.

2.3 Dalit Politics and the BSP

Sudha Pai's research frames the BSP's rise under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati as an unfinished democratic revolution rooted in Ambedkarite ideology (Pai, 2002). Pai and Kumar's (2023) longitudinal fieldwork across 2015–2022 documents non-dominant Dalit sub-castes — Khatik, Balmiki — shifting toward the BJP for both material reasons (perceived SP/BSP neglect favoring Jatavs and Yadavs) and cultural ones, terming this combination "subaltern Hindutva."

2.4 Electoral Data and "New Welfarism"

The evidence from the CSDS-Lokniti survey confirms that there is a significant change in the material conditions of different groups within the population. The data from the last election shows that about 59% of non-Yadav OBCs supported the NDA government while only 34% backed the opposition parties. The same data further shows that 92% of Muslims and 82% of Yadavs have at least some favor for the opposition parties. This indicates that even though the support of non-Jatav Dalits for the NDA is quite weak compared

to other upper-caste groups and non-Yadav OBCs, it is still important to observe that non-Jatav Dalits form a different community as a whole.

2.5 Contested Interpretations

There exists a controversy among scholars over how extensive the realignment is and how it is characterized. The disagreement between Jaffrelot and Verniers on one hand and Nalin Mehta on another over data on caste-representation among BJP legislators (Mehta, 2022; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2022) shows empirical debates over the magnitude of incorporation of non-dominant castes into the BJP. On a more substantive level, interpretations of this process can be classified into two. Social-engineering/Hindutva approach sees this as elite-driven and contingent on what the electoral outcome may be.

2.6 Research Gap and This Paper's Contribution

This paper's contribution is threefold and cumulative rather than mere description. First, it triggers the establishment of a new three-way falsifiable test (§1, concretized in Table 1); it helps to put together the vast number of narratives and makes them comparable based on a few defined criteria (the three-way test). Second, it utilizes within-case failures (1993; 2007) for comparison purposes with 2014–2022 successes; it emphasizes what changes took place rather than what already worked. Third, it tries to expand the horizon of the research by finding extra cases of interest beyond Uttar Pradesh and taking their experience into account (e.g., West Bengal as a negative case; AKP in Turkey as a case of interest). In this way, none of the steps mentioned above necessitates collecting new primary data for the sake of making any contribution to the literature; they rather provide new angles of view on the same empirical basis formed by the works of different scholars.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Social Engineering

According to Jaffrelot's (2003) construct, caste mobilization comprises a type of organizational manipulation of electoral incentives and is a deliberate attempt to create a fracture in existing caste affiliation with the backing of lesser-known political mobilized groups. The theory is strong in clarifying how timely the BJP was in engaging with different groups but is limited in explaining the factor concerning the level of ideology exerted by the mobilized groups.

3.2 Patronage-Democracy

The comparative framework of Chandra (2004) views caste voting as a rational response to anticipated distributions of patronage in terms of jobs, welfare benefits, and infrastructure, considering ideology as inconsequential. In the case of Uttar Pradesh, this theory helps in understanding so-called "new welfarism" to consolidate support of non-dominant castes after 2014.

3.3 Subaltern Hindutva

Despite the apparent importance of Pai and Kumar (2023) as well as Narayan (2006, 2009, 2011, 2021) about broader cultural and symbolic dimensions, the historical fieldwork shows how far these two frameworks understated actual efforts made towards cultural recognition. The RSS instituted the cultural recognition of local icons among Dalits and OBCs, resulting in the amplification of the group identity.

3.4 Synthesis

These frameworks do not eliminate each other. The use of social-engineering theory explains the strategy and timing of the organization by, for example, explaining how and when the various policies were put into effect, while the framework of patronage-democracy explains the economic reason or foundation of these changes, and lastly, the framework of subaltern-Hindutva analyzes the process from the cultural point of view.

Table 1. Comparison of the Three Theoretical Frameworks Applied in This Paper

Framework	Primary Driver	Key Source	Distinguishing Prediction	Where Tested
Social Engineering	Elite/organizational strategy	Jaffrelot (2003)	Gains follow organizational investment, not precede it	§5.3 (Amit Shah reorganization, 2013–14)
Patronage-Democracy	Material welfare delivery	Chandra (2004)	Beneficiaries support BJP more than non-beneficiaries within same caste	§5.4 (CSDS-Lokniti beneficiary data)
Subaltern Hindutva	Cultural/symbolic recognition	Narayan (2021); Pai & Kumar (2023)	Community identification is documented qualitatively but not yet isolated from material treatment in the same survey instrument	§5.2–5.4 (Khatik, Balmiki fieldwork)

Note. This table operationalizes the three-way test proposed in §1 into distinguishing, falsifiable predictions, which §6.1 evaluates against the evidence assembled in Section 5.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative and historical approach concerning synthesis, which is suitable for a longitudinal investigation of three decades, and which is not meant to collect survey data or carry out interviews. In this respect, findings are based on the interpretive analytical approach and not statistical causes. In terms of quantitative information (elections, ratio of votes and composition of ministries), it follows some rules, namely, (1) priority should be given to ECI and CSDS-Lokniti data (2) next comes academic literature and (3) third is reputable journalism. In addition, this investigation is divided into three parts: (1) policies and organization (2) electoral results (3) other researchers' views on the problem studied. The main issues that should be paid attention to: (1) all the sources used are secondary, which means that it is impossible to check the findings independently (2) rules for defining CSDS-Lokniti category differ from year to year (3) while the sources selection was quite wide, it cannot guarantee neutrality in this regard.

5. HISTORICAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

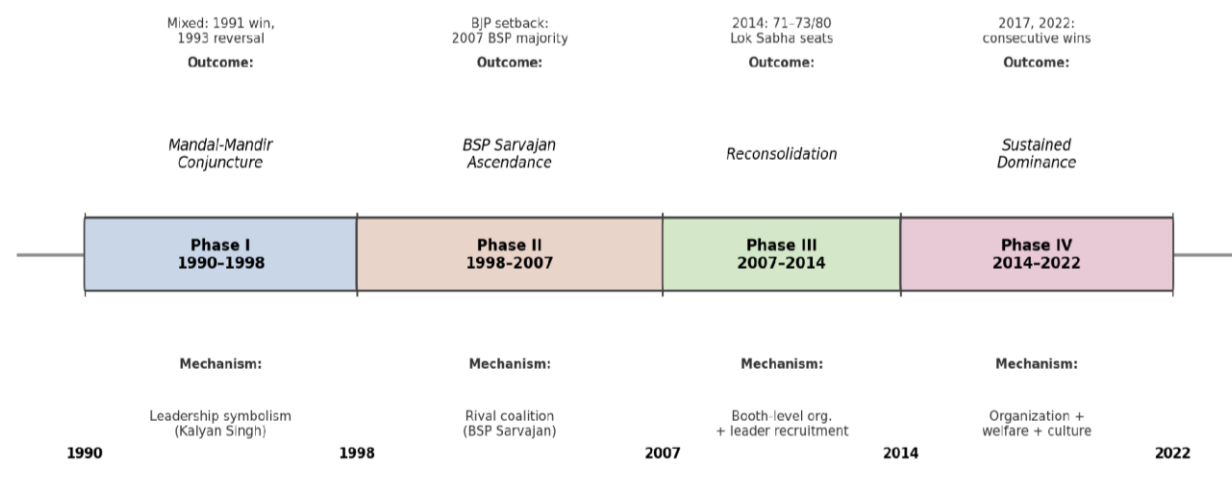


Figure 1. Periodization of Hindu nationalist mobilization of non-dominant castes in Uttar Pradesh, 1990–2022. Each phase's dominant mechanism and electoral outcome are summarized above and detailed in §5.1–5.4.

Table 2. Seat and Vote Shares of Major Parties in Uttar Pradesh, Selected Elections, 1991–2022

Election	BJP Seats	BJP Vote %	SP	BSP	Outcome
1991 (Assembly)	221/425	~31.5%	—	12	BJP majority
1993 (Assembly)	177/425	~33.3%	109	67	SP–BSP coalition
2007 (Assembly)	51/403	~17%	97	206	BSP majority
2012 (Assembly)	47/403	~15%	224	80	SP majority
2014 (Lok Sabha)	71/80 w/allies	(73) ~42.3%	5	0	BJP-led NDA (national)
2017 (Assembly)	325/403	~39.7%	47	19	BJP majority
2022 (Assembly)	255/403 w/allies	(273) ~41.3%	111	1	BJP-led NDA majority

Note. ECI Stat reports as compared along with Hasan (1998), Jaffrelot (2003), and Pai (2002) for the period of 1991–2007. Rows carrying the mark of (Assembly) refer to those of Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly (total number being 403–425) in this period. While rows marked (Lok Sabha) are related to the national parliament (80 Lok Sabha seats from the State of Uttar Pradesh), which may not allow a meaningful comparison in terms of seat sharing due to the fact that Assembly numbers represent only one aspect.

5.1 Phase I: The Mandal-Mandir Conjuncture (1990–1998)

In 1990, the Mandal Commission's recommendations with regard to job and educational reservation for backward classes, along with BJP's movement for the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, led to the V.P. Singh government coming to an end. BJP formed the government in Uttar Pradesh by winning a clear majority in the 1991 elections under the leadership of Kalyan Singh, a non-dominant backward caste (OBC) leader who thereafter, in accordance with the Mandal recommendations, promoted the interests of Hindutva followers, obtaining votes from the JD's Yadav-based vote bank. Singh's government initiated a series of administrative actions in favor of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple movement, including land acquisition near the disputed site in 1991.

The demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992 led to communal riots in the country. The end of Singh's government saw Uttar Pradesh under President's Rule. The elections held in 1993 were characterized as "Mandal in control of Kamandal" because of the severe fall in Janata Party seats, down to 177 from the initial 221.

5.2 Phase II: BJP Decline and the BSP's Sarvajan Strategy (1998–2007)

Despite the consolidation of the BJP at the national level under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee from 1998–2004, the political situation in Uttar Pradesh proved unstable with frequent changes of government. The BSP underwent a remarkable change from its earlier stand of being a party of the Bahunjans (or the majority community) to becoming one which represents everyone in its slogan "Sarvajan hitay, sarvajan sukhay," which means welfare of everyone, by becoming sympathetic to the Brahmin community through organizing Brahmin Sammelans (meetings) and having reflected in the results of the assembly elections held in Uttar Pradesh in 2007, wherein this party got a clear majority by winning 206 seats out of the total 403 seats with about 30–31% vote share. It fielded a total of 80 Brahmin candidates, of which 46 were elected. According to the analysis done on the basis of numerous surveys, the BSP got nearly 21% votes from the Dalit community, of which a major share was from non-Jatav Dalits like Pasies and Valmiks, while it got about 17% votes from the Brahmins, although this community remained part of the BJP vote bank. Yadav voters showed loyalty towards the SP. This is important as it showed that non-dominant OBCs, non-Jatav Dalits, and even the upper castes could join hands against the BJP at that point in time, which was not

expected earlier. The coalition proved to be fragile as the core Dalit voters felt neglected as the focus shifted to their upper caste allies and other caste voters did not feel assured of their loyalty.

5.3 Phase III: Reconsolidation Toward 2014 (2007–2014)

Beginning with this 2012 low mark — along with a meagre 10-member representation in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections — the appointment of Amit Shah to lead the Uttar Pradesh unit of the party in 2013 acted as a pivotal turning point for the party as it emerged from an internal assessment which showed that approximately 35% of the BJP's traditional support base did not come out and vote. His style brought in the establishment of committees at all the approximately 140,000 polling places in the state, giving importance to systematic outreach to the voter list and also engaging in house-to-house mobilization efforts through coordination of RSS volunteers on the field, in which candidates were identified mainly based on electability in the area and not only according to loyalty to the party. The party also recruited leaders belonging to backward castes by taking away politicians who were groomed earlier in Professor Kanshi Ram's (BSP founder) paradigm of leadership and bringing them into the party — Swami Prasad Maurya (OBC), R.K. Chaudhary (Pasi, a Dalit group in the area) and Om Prakash Rajbhar — which reflects an institutional transfer of leadership rather than organic growth.

The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013, under the leadership of the SP government, ripped apart the well-established interpersonal relationship between the Jat and Muslim farmers in western UP (Pai, cited in Outlook India, 2026). It was evident from the statements made by Amit Shah during his campaign afterwards and the reference to the "revenge" statement from Muzaffarnagar, for which he had to face questions from the Election Commission, showing a fundamental and continuing polarization of the people both religiously and by caste. The Lok Sabha elections of 2014 validated the realignment: BJP together with the Apna Dal won 71 or 73 seats out of a total of 80 seats in UP (ECI, n.d.), with 20 to 25% of Yadavs (CSDS-Lokniti survey, via Outlook India, 2026) crossing over to BJP.

5.4 Phase IV: Sustained Dominance and Welfare Politics (2014–2022)

The 2017 victory of the BJP's 325/403 seat landslide win was achieved without a declared chief minister and based on Modi's national persona rather than caste-specific appointments, according to which the BJP party was calculated as pursuing a broad coalition. Milan Vaishnav remarked that the 2017 elections represented a plebiscite on demonetization politics, which warns against the tendency to analyze electoral outcomes in caste terms only. According to Chaturvedi, Jaffrelot, and Kalaiyaran (2023), the systematization of caste mobilization strategies started after internal recommendations by general secretary K. Govindacharya in 1988 and arrived to a full-fledged bureaucratic mechanism with the 2013-14 reorganization process of the party.

Among the most characteristic features of this period was the combination of welfare benefit delivery with caste mobilization, which led to the remarkable result of around 80% of households possessing free food rations and 57% of farmers receiving the benefits (Mishra & Palshikar, 2022). Dalit beneficiaries proved to be more inclined towards the support of BJP as compared to the Dalits in general, indicating patronage effects, as the caste group remains constant in every comparison.

Table 3. Ministerial Caste Composition vs. Population Share, Adityanath Government, First Term (2017–2022)

Category	Ministers	Share (%)	Approx. Pop. Share	Gap
Upper Castes	27	45.0%	~20%	+25 pp (over)
OBC	23	38.3%	~40–44%	–2 to –6 pp (under)
Dalit (SC)	9	15.0%	~21%	–6 pp (under)

Note. These two snapshots have provided similar results in their reports regarding the composition of the Adityanath government council at its peak strength as in the case of Wire's (2026) retrospective study and NewsNationTV's (2017) first report about the 47 members of the council who belonged to upper castes.

The information reveals straightforwardly what the trend across the four phases suggests qualitatively: the gains made by the non-dominant castes were indeed real when compared to the historical baseline of the BJP but fell significantly short of population parity, which negates any possibility of a "substantive inclusion" interpretation without providing grounds for a completely cynical "no change" perspective.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 A Hedged, Evidence-Weighted Judgment

The findings pertaining to four levels support a tripartite judgment instead of an indeterminate one. First, a clear evolutionary process of social engineering has been observed, as evidenced by the movement from the personalized and symbolic leadership strategy to the bureaucratic establishment of the welfare system in Phase IV. There is a fundamental difference in terms of the actual implementation of the social engineering strategy, and the former is characterized with two decades of operational experience. Table 5.4 details how the Dalit beneficiaries voted differently from the caste members, holding caste constant while changing the treatment, thus providing the most compelling evidence to support the theory of patronage politics and proving the point regarding the mechanisms of implementation.

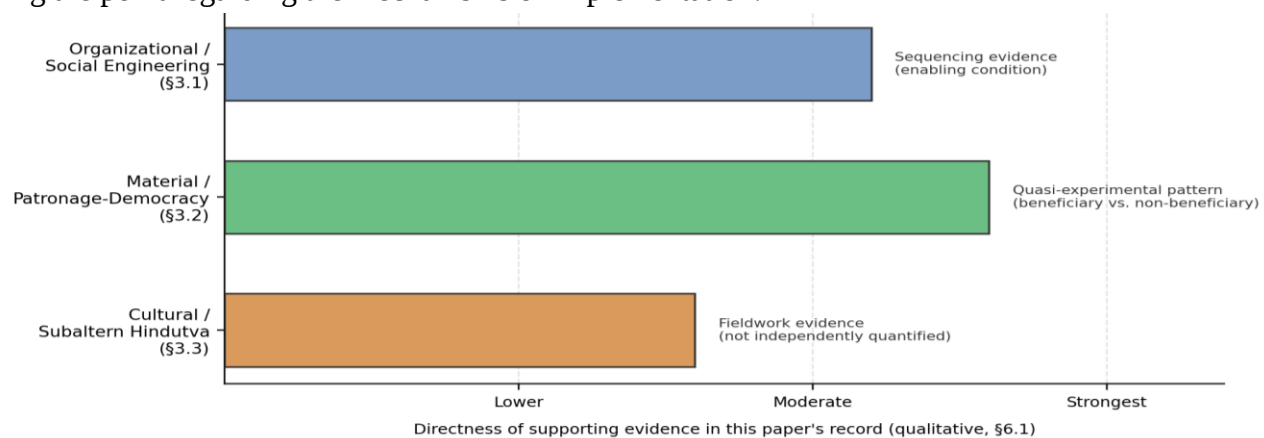


Figure 2. Provisional evidentiary weighting of the three mobilization mechanisms, 2014–2022 (qualitative schematic of the judgment argued in this section, not a statistical estimate).

Overall, we could say that the organizational/patronage leverage would seem to have accounted for a much larger amount of explanatory work in 2014–2022, although this finding is based on a slightly weaker basis for cultural leverage, and the other order can still be defended based on the use of only secondary data sources by this paper (in section 4). In this way, we have the idea of a relative ranking here rather than an unqualified choice between three possibilities. When we talk about party systems: the independent Dalit base of BSP and the Yadav-Muslim coalition of SP have deteriorated a lot — this goes well with the idea laid down by Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020a), who assert that Indian sub-national party systems have been restructured and not just rotated — but elite defections which took place before 2022 show us that this re-structuring process is still controlled and reversible.

6.2 A Negative Case and a Comparative Check

The importance of the analysis is demonstrated by the two checks which will be useful in using the single-case study. First, West Bengal is a suitable example of a negative case in India where the BJP had put a lot of effort into promoting Hindutva through organization after 2014. West Bengal can be compared with Uttar Pradesh in terms of the use of booth-level politics at the level of the state assemblies. The BJP was able to achieve some success in West Bengal, but its dominance was not to last after the year 2021, when it lost decisively in the elections. The presence of the two rival coalitions in West Bengal demonstrates how complex understanding the rival coalitions can be as there is a formal coalition represented by the Trinamool Congress which brings many castes to the side of the ruling party. Accordingly, one cannot say anything about the elections in West Bengal without analyzing the nature and structure of their rival coalitions.

7. CONCLUSION

The rise of Hindu nationalist forces amongst non-dominant castes in Uttar Pradesh was neither instant nor predetermined from an ideological standpoint. At two vital points —1993 and 2007— politically adverse coalitions succeeded in performing better than this force. We consider two important factors in the process of realignment lasting from 2014 to 2022, which include building new organizations and delivering social benefits, and the present research provides evidence supporting these two aspects. The two general conclusions follow here. Given that the religious nationalist forces rely on coalitions to win elections, it becomes necessary to change strategies considerably from time to time by making concessions to outside groups but avoiding an exclusive focus on ideology and ideology-related issues. It leads to the development of important questions about the nature of religious nationalistic forces in comparison with other political organizations based on castes and ethnicities. In this context, it appears compatible with Jaffrelot's (2021) arguments about the process of Hindu nationalists' breakthrough in the political arena under Modi through institutional and coalition change rather than via direct ideological break with previous political systems. In terms of evaluating coalitions behind such ideological campaigns, multiple aspects are for consideration at once, and there is no single measure sufficient for making such an assessment.

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