



From Russia with love: Gerasim Lebedev and the Story of Modern Bangla Theatre

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Abstract: This article tries to analyse and delineate the life and work as well as the unique experiences of Gerasim Lebedev it moreover wishes to document his travels and experiences , all in a transnational and transcultural framework and try to trace and contextualise how a 18th century Russian violinist in British Colonial Bengal went on to the stage the first modern theatre in India using one of its own native language's i.e, bangla and subsequently started a tradition of stage performance still in practise today in the region.

Key Words: History, theatre, Bangla theatre, cultural history, India.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The present day Bengali Theatre as we know it and as it exists in the present is of a very hybrid form, a curious mix of elements from all over the world, where actors recite Bengali monologues against a very western set design supported by an array of Indian often classical instruments together with lights and methods of acting developed in school's acting in Poland or Russia , thus it is very difficult to arrive upon and exact definition of what Bengali theatre is, however the most important and albeit only criterion to be referred to as such, is I feel the use of the Bengali language as the medium of communication to portray such diverse and hybrid ideas and practices. While considering such a parameter as the essence of Bangla theatre, if one was to write or trace it's history thus one gets acquainted with the unique character of one Gerasim Stepanovich Lededev, born in Yaroslavl in Russia , Gerasim or Herasim as his name is also spelled is actually credited with the staging of the first modern Bangla theatre in proscenium, thus leading to him being referred to as the father of modern Bengali Theatre. My paper mainly aims to study This individual Gerasim in context to his said achievement and to contextualise why suddenly a celebrated violinist in post Enlightenment Russia would suddenly find himself in a ship from London to Madras with an english military band and then thereafter found himself in Calcutta directing as well as financing the first Bengali stage drama. Moreover I attempt to locate such contributions of lebedev in a linguistic and cultural arena which is totally alien to him, and while doing to also try to understand the interplay between the the "local" Bengali and the "cosmopolitan" and "global" influences which Gerasim himself had carried (a development discussed in more detail subsequently) due to his life and travels and which went into the staging of such an play. What is important here to note is that in order to fully understand the nature of such an event as well as to truly comprehend the importance of his achievements it is necessary to view his life and his works from a transnational and transcultural framework. I say this because Gerasim himself it seemed was quite aware of the Hybridity and mix of influences in the theatre which he thus went on to stage in Calcutta which I have tried to elaborate in the subsequent parts of this paper. It is also worth noting here that what also makes lebedev's work and approach important and unique is the fact that his efforts also indicate & show a new orientation among indologist's and orientalisists which was characterised by an effort to engage in a sort of dialogue between the colony and the metropole, between the east and the west. This hybrid and experimental form of modernity showcased in the form of his plays I feel one finds also represented in modern Bengali beliefs and practices and has manifestations in several other such cultural developments which went on to characterise a unique notion of Bengali modernity. Coming back to Lebedev however what also thus makes him important and relevant even today is the fact that, when the first bengali playwrights down the years attempted to stage the the first indigenously directed bangla theatre the motifs and blueprints used in them like for example in the belgachia theatre continued to use practices and forms which were initiated by Lebedev and his unique experimentation. To study such a character and the trans cultural and national influences in his produced plays I have divided this paper into three main parts as I felt that in order to understand this interplay between the various influences



and the hybrid form he thus created and put up on the stage in the form of a translated version of Richard Paul Jodrell the “Disguise”, a text Lebedev himself translated into Bengali and whose adaptation he decided to thus enact out in the Theatre he had appropriately named the Bengali Playhouse and which he himself had created in 1795. Thus, I aim to first discuss Lebedev’s formative years and the experiences and journey’s he had in Europe and how such events and experiences paved way for his interest as well as journey to India. Then subsequently I felt it was important to discuss his travels in Colonial India and the experiences he there after encountered in the colony after arriving from the metropole which lead up to thus quite unexpectedly for a renowned violinist like him to put up the first Bengali language Proscenium play , even though he was due to this almost pushed to bankruptcy and finally we are going to discuss the various elements which he incorporated into his production as well as try to ascertain why and for whom did he undertake such an endeavour previously unheard of. Thus I felt only by first discussing and then juxtaposing these two parts of his lives one in the colony in Europe and other in the metropole in India can one thus understand the pioneering figure of Lebedev in context to not only Bangla theatre but also general inquiry into the study of Indian philosophy, society and culture or indology as well and ascertain the various and diverse influences which thus went into his form of theatre.

PART I

In the following part, I would like to highlight and discuss certain developments and experiences lebedev had in his initial years travelling through Europe or his journey through the Metropole. The epitaph on Lededev tombstone reads as follows ” he was the first of the sons of Russia to penetrate into eastern India and having taken on the morals of the indian people took their language to Russia”. The reason I mention this is to highlight how he was seen and how the society around him wanted him to be remembered which however is in marked contrast to what one finds here in India. The key to understanding this dichotomy lies however I feel in studying first his initial years carefully in the cultural milieu of post Reformation and French Revolutionary europe. Lededev was born in 1749 in Yaroslavl to most probably a serf family , who were engaged in ecceselestial work, his father in all probabilities was the choir master of the local church. It is worth mentioning here that lebedev’s own account portray his parents to be of very conservative orientation thus he did not provide for him any substantial means to a proper formal education, moreover being the oldest child of a relatively poor household the burden to start earning meant that except for his family’s traditional occupation Lededev could hardly receive any other knowledge. Scholars however provide that since his childhood he had a deep desire for learning and a thirst for knowledge, however we do not know whether this conclusion was came upon in hindsight. What is important however in this context is that merit and excellence in a particular field during lebedev’s time in tsarist russia i.e During Catherine the great’s reign had started to provide opportunities for upward mobility for a very miniscule section of the serf population, Lebedevs family thus belonged to this group. As a result Lededev when he was 15 years old came to St.petersburg where his father used to sing in the royal chapel(most probably belonging to Andrey Razumovsky, their lord’s private chapel). He would go on to spend 13 years in this city and it is here that he would start learning to play the violin and cello. It is here also that his subsequent fame as an excellent violinist brought him in close contact with the elite circles of St.Petersburg and the Russian nobility, especially the count, Razumovsky who himself was a celebrated torban (an Ukrainian Folk instrument) player and very well known among the musician circles of Europe. Thus we see that when The count was selected in 1777 as the Russian ambassador to Italy he was due to their close relationship accompanied by Lededev in this journey to Naples. However before they could reach their destination, The Austro-Prussian conflict had begun and Russia being an ally to Austria meant that the count and his entourage were rather diverted to a safe passage to Vienna. It is here in Vienna according to Hayat Hahmud that Lebedev spent at least a year and also it is here that he became one of the most renowned violinists in Europe during such a period of stay. It is worth mentioning in this context that Vienna during this period was largely considered as the musical capital of Europe and it was here that great stalwarts of European classical music like Beethoven ,Mozart or more importantly in our context Joseph Haydn resided and often composed and showcased their music. The count being himself very close to Hyden meant that gradually lebedev also got the opportunity to interact with such a stalwart of European classical music. We do not however know whether lebedev also collaborated with them in any way. What we are certain is that it is after his stay in Vienna that Lebedev goes on to mention for the first time that he now felt that he could from there on sustain himself by virtue of his music. Infact until his travel back to St.petersburg from India, it was this skill which became his main source of income both as a composer as well as a teacher for the elite households of European decent. However Lebedev being a person of very ambitious nature it was unlikely that he would stop himself just to Vienna only thus, one finds that soon after he leaves the count’s camp and starts travelling throughout Europe. It is worth mentioning in this context the the post enlightenment rationality and ethics which developed in Europe during



that time created a zeitgeist in favour of travel and adventure as well as an intense search for knowledge from primary sources and directly without any mediation and it is likely that Lebedev himself was also influenced by such an prevailing consciousness. Thus, mahmud provides that on the basis of letters and travelogues which he had written or received from 1782 onwards Lebedev started travelling extensively throughout western europe, thus he visited various cities in Italy as well as Germany as well as paris and London a multiple times.

It is most probably while staying in London that Lededev's interest in the subcontinent may have risen in all probabilities. It is worth mentioning in this context since by the late 1700s the British had started establishing control over vast stretches of the sub continent and political interest in the subcontinent often coincided with a deep philosophical inquiry into the practices , habits as well as cultural and social modes of interaction in this newly conquered territories, interest about the east especially in context to its exotic nature in comparison to the western other had existed in Europe for centuries however with rise of colonialism it allowed more and more Europeans to easily visit the orient. Thus, one sees the rise of orientalism as an important philosophical trend during this time as well as institutions like the Asiatic Society where such knowledge of the east could be codified and translated for consumption among the Europeans. It is with mentioning in this context also that apart from such a prevailing condition of philosophical interest in the east there in London Lebedev must have also been exposed to more material representations which ignited in him a curiosity for India. Thus - a) when he was in England he must have seen various consumer items from India selling in shops. b) There also was a regular traffic of ships leaving to India from the British ports. c) The stocks of the British East India Company were performing very well in the London stock exchange. d) A host of publications from newspaper to journals, from novels to cartoons showcasing various information and curiosities about the east were being published daily. e) The flooding of stories of various European fortune seekers about their travels and rich and myriad experiences in the exotic orient. All these factors when coupled with the prevailing zeitgeist in Europe coupled with lucrative economic prospects may have led to the rise in interest about India in Lebedev, who as the previous parts showcased was showed to always have a thirst for knowledge and a spirit of inquiry and adventure, moreover he also as evident did not prefer settling down in one place. Thus in 1785 gerasim decided to sail towards India in the East India company ship named "Rodney", and finally reached the southeastern coast of India i.e. the Madras port in July 27, 1785.

PART II

Thus begins his journey in the Colony from the metropole. Before continuing any further I would however like to read the words of The Plaque commemorating Lebedev in kolkata, which thus says "Gerasim Lebedev, a Russian adventurer, linguist, translator, musician and writer lived in Calcutta for ten years from 1787-1797. Lebedev, a pioneer of russian indology and also 'Bengalee Theatre' opened with the assistance of local intellectuals a theatre at 25, Domtalla in Kolkata that used Bengali actors and actresses for the first time in the performances of Bengali adaptations of ' The Disguise' and 'Love is the Best Doctor' on 27th November, 1795". The plaque is indicative of the lasting memory which lebedev thus managed to sustain in India especially in Bengal. Before going into the context where he decided upon starting a Bengali theatre in Kolkata, I feel it is necessary to trace his journey from Madras to Kolkata in short. Thus, After arriving in madras in 1785 Ledebev would stay there only for a couple of years however these years were one of the most economically productive phase for him, it is worth mentioning here that Lebedev by the time of his arrival in india was already a renowned figure in musical circles of europe and must have performed several times during his visit to London, thus he was already a relatively renowned figure. One also needs to understand I feel that while the colony were essential to the existence of the metropole their existed among the colonisers a deep dissatisfaction for the conditions of the colony and a constant romanticization and longing of the familiar Anglo Saxon world of imperial britain, resulting in many attempts by the colonial elites to create a sort of similar world back in the colony, individuals like Lebedev were essential in such a creation however they were still in short supply since the east continued till then to be a land very less explored and known about, thus beyond the comfort zone of the average european man except for a adventurous few. Thus, from his first days in madras Lebedev was accorded with a grand welcome by the officials of the company there moreover he was also given a job for conducting musical performances for an surprisingly huge fee of two hundred pounds per year. This amount seems more and more outrageous when compared to the fact that an average officer of the east india company was paid only about sixty to eighty pounds yearly. On top of that as his popularity within the town increased he was also employed by the Europeans as a teacher of music. All these meant that within just two years he managed to get hold of a substantial amount of wealth which we will see would come in very handy. What however needs to be discussed first is why would Lebedev suddenly leave such a lucrative source of



income and suddenly decide in 1787 to travel to Calcutta. It is important here to understand that economic prerogatives alone were not the only reason for Lebedev's journey to India. Thus despite being born into an impoverished household it was his eminence as a violinist which allowed him wealth as well as social status in European elite circles. It is also within this circle where new and dominant intellectual trends arose which must have influenced Lebedev too. Thus as also evident from his own memoirs, one of the main reasons for his travel to India was to learn about the philosophy and culture as well as the great musical traditions of the east, curiosity upon which as mentioned earlier must have been generated during his visits to London. Thus, apart from being the main urban centre of British colonialism in India, it also acted as its administrative heart thus Lebedev hoped to receive the patronage of more eminent and high ranking officers of the East India Company in Calcutta. Above all, however he hoped to find in Calcutta a suitable tutor who would act as a medium in his quest to learn and understand the society and culture of India, and since during this time it was considered that it was the Brahmin Pandit who were the custodian of all knowledge in the subcontinent, he hoped to find such a candidate who would thus teach him the Brahmanical knowledge system.

As expected he was greeted with much appreciation and respect in Calcutta, and soon became close to various important officials of the East India Company. Here he not only began to impart lessons on playing the violin to wealthy individuals but also participated in a host of performances which it seems he himself conducted such events helped him acquire a considerable amount of popularity in the elite circles of Calcutta. Also simultaneously there occurred a very important development, as I have mentioned Gerasim hoped to find in Calcutta a tutor who was well versed in English as well as Sanskrit and Bengali as he wanted to learn the above mentioned languages so as to allow him to study various Indian texts and treatises without any native help. Though he initially failed in this context, it was finally after two years in Calcutta in 1789 that he got acquainted with a Goloknath Das, a man he would go on to refer as his friend, philosopher and guide of sorts and whom he soon appointed his tutor. Goloknath was a teacher by profession and had prior experience in teaching European's Indian languages thus he was very well suited to this job, though evidence provides that he may not have been a great scholar of the Sanskrit language it is through him however more importantly that Lebedev started learning Bengali, elementary Sanskrit and Hindustani. As his proficiency in the said languages increased he started translating certain native documents to English the first among them being a Bengali calendar or *ponjika* as it is referred to as originally in Bangla, this was followed by a more complex endeavour of translating poems of Bharat Chandra Ray, though we do not know exactly how many or which ones he did translate since he later had used two poems of the aforementioned author in his play one can assume that at least a few were done. The curious choice of the objects to choose to translate sort of provides one with the hint that Goloknath's growing importance in his life as it was most probably him who suggested to him such texts. Thus, during this time on advice of his tutor to sort of test his proficiency in the Bengali language Lebedev decided to translate two plays "The Disguise" by Richard Paul Jodrell and "Love is the best Doctor" by Moliere into Bengali. It is worth noting in this context is that the proficiency of Goloknath as a scholar was actually limited, thus oftentimes such translations as mentioned above were done with the help of other eminent pundits and scholars of the language. Such a fact is quite evident from the fact that Lebedev goes on to provide that after his two translations were formally approved by other Pandits. However what information is more important is that it was his tutor and I quote "Goloknath made me a proposal that if I choose to present these plays publicly he would engage to supply me with actors of both sexes from among the natives, with which idea I was exceedingly pleased".

As evident from the above statement it is this offer and its subsequent acceptance that would go on to alter the history of Bengali theatre forever, as never before had a European text been enacted in Bengali language in the form of a play on a stage. From the beginning, one can comprehend that this production was going to be a unique creation of hybridity since though Lebedev was the actual central figure in this project, he was assisted in various degrees at various levels by many native collaborators. It is also important here to note that Lebedev by virtue of his travels in Europe and birth in the famous centre of Volkov theatre had overtime seen or participated as a musician in theatrical productions in Europe. While in Kolkata during Lebedev's time there also existed The Calcutta Theatre, which was the main and albeit only public theatre which housed plays of an European arrangement, which must have been visited by Lebedev also. It is also worth noticing here that by he decided to enact such a play he had acquire at least some kind of foothold over the Bengali language and his choice of translating works of Bharat Chandra Ray, which was extensively used in ingenious theatrical productions or *jatras* or *kobi gaan* meant that during this time in Calcutta as a part of his attempts to understand Indian culture and arts he must have witnessed such local albeit subaltern cultural practices, which also influenced Lebedev especially since the actors and actresses he went on to use were mostly used to such performances. Thus, taking all things into consideration Lebedev decided to accept Goloknath's proposal and decided to stage a Bengali



play on the stage, however for that uniquely he did not use the existing infrastructure of the Calcutta Playhouse rather for unknown reasons(speculations though provide that the institution was not very encouraged by the fact that lebedev sought to enact a play in bengali and thus may have refused to provide their space) decided to create a new space altogether by his own means. Thus in 1795 he decided to rent the premises of one Jaganath Ganguly, residing at 25 Dومتolla Lane for a monthly rent of sixty rupees. It is here that he went on to construct his own stage for the purpose of enacting the play, which he decided was to be his Bengali translation of Richard Paul Jodrell's ' The Disguise', moreover he also quite appropriately named the new stage as the Bengali Theatre. The Play as I have been mentioning since the beginning was characterised by an unique hybridity which becomes very clear once one looks into the its first advertisement which emerged in the Calcutta Gazette on Thursday, November 5, 1795 which stated that :-

“By Permission of the Honourable the

Governor General.

Mr. LEBEDEFFS

New Theatre in the Doomtullah,

Decorated in the Bengalee Style,

Will be opened very shortly,with a Play called

THE DISGUISE,

The characters to be supported by performers of both sexes.

To commence with Vocal and instrumental Music, called

THE INDIAN SERENADE.

To these musical Instruments which are held in esteem by the Bengallees,will be added European. The words of the much admired poet Shree Bharat Chandra Ray are set to Music.

Between the acts some amusing Curiosities will be introduced.

The day for the Exhibition, together with the particular details of the Performance, will be notified in the course of the next week.”

Thus the uniqueness and hybridity of this production becomes quite self-evident. The play was finally staged in 27th November 1795 to a hall which was full to its capacity despite the relatively high price of the tickets (Box and pit- Rs. 8 sikkahs and gallery- Rs. 4 sikkahs). The three act original play however was shrunk to just one act inspite of that it was a roaring success so much so that there were soon demands for a second act of this play which Lebedev promptly went on to do. This time he decided to keep the three act format of the original text. However since in all likelihood he had not translated the entirety of the text to Bengali this time the play was partially enacted in certain parts in English as well as Hindustani. This was performed on 21 march 1796 to again an almost full house who had mostly reserved their seats by virtue of subscription (a system by which the audience played an annual fee to the theatre in exchange for reservation of seats for any show in the said theatre hall) in addition to that he also staged his other play that is 'Love is the best Doctor' on the same day to a more general audience who were not paying him any subscription. Unfortunately this became Lebedev and the Bengali Theatrer's last production as soon he went bankrupt and had to give up the space ,the reasons for such a development however goes beyond the purview of this paper but what i will mention in short is that it was mostly by virtue of activities of the only other rival group the Company Theatre that lebedev soon found himself submerged in several lawsuits and claims of unpaid dues that forced him to sell everything and soon after return to St. Petersburg. What is important here to note in this context is the for the short time it existed it had undoubtedly attracted a lot of e english patrons who must have been liked the novel and entertaining attempt by Lebedev, however what is more important is that if one is to refer Lebedev as the father of modern Bengali theatre truely and not in



hindsight one must examine whether he himself had any such aspirations, the most appropriate way of arriving at such a conclusion would be thus I feel to closely examine the various features and arrangements of the play thus enacted. It is beyond doubt that he held an unique admiration and respect for Indian culture and philosophy evident in the introduction of the now famous " the grammar of the pure and mixed east indian dialects" which widely is regarded as the first modern treatise of Russian indology. However an in depth study of the composition of the plays may help us in this regard, for this purpose I decided to use the First enactment of the disguise since it has the most sources, I would however like to state before going further into such a detail that Lebedev was also a product of his times , thus one must refrain from judging him from a moral ground of the present, so even though notions of racial superiority and cultural hegemony are difficult to find in Lebedev's work and actions it is worth understanding that a certain degree of exoticism and reductionism is found in his references ,thus -a) As provided in the advertisement Gerasim provided that he intended to design and decorate the playhouse where the play was to be enacted in the 'bengali style' though it is difficult to accurately define what here is meant by the bengali style, what is important here to note is that it must be of a orientation which the indigeneous population be familiar with. What Lebedev himself provides is that he had decided to decorate the floor which was to be used for staging scenes with paintings according to bengali taste. Which could be interpreted among other things as the use of *Alpona*, (an auspicious white paint used to decorate the floor in Bengal on special occasions). b) In its music arrangement Lebedev claimed to create a unique fusion comprising of Indian (by Indian here he must have meant mostly instruments used in and around the Bengal and Madras Presidency and by European he must have used the violin and cello among other instruments since he had a certain degree of proficiency in them as one can find in the above portions of this paper). c) there is also the mention of the use of two poems of whom he referred to be of the renowned bard shree Bharat Chandra Ray, though it is difficult to provide with surety what may have been the exact two poem, they most probably belonged to the Bidya Shundor Kabya, a text which was widely popular in Bengal during that time and which one may assume by virtue of his tutor Goloknath Das he had been referred to.d) While selecting the appropriate text to be used for adaption for a bangla stage play the choice of 'The Disguise' seems to be a very curious one as why rather than choosing a more famous and classical he text decided to go with the one written by Jodrell who was largely unknown figure, reasons for such can be determined from Lebedev's own statement's , thus he provided that after observing various native performances that the indigenous audience preferred mimicry and drollery to grave tragedies of the classic Shakespearean style, while this statement maybe wrong one must take into account the fact that Lebedev had a very restrictive knowledge about classical indian theatrical practices since seminal texts like natyashastra were yet to be glanced upon by Europeans , in such a situation his said opinions must have been formed by virtue of viewing jatras or palas or from Golaknath who himself being of a very humble background may have introduced him to such forms of native performance which were very popular among the subaltern population of bengal, such performances most importantly did include a heavy use of motifs like comedy, infact his arrangement of the play from a theoretical perspective can be argued was based on a system which closely resembled such a form i.e, Commedia dell'arte a form of theatre originating in italy which relied heavily on use of a lot of music, instruments, dance and sarcasm in a very crude form to address present political and cultural development, it also used a lot of masks and improvisation on stage as its characteristic features, though such a form may have been popular throughout Europe he must have also witnessed it in depth during many of his visits to Italy, thus one finds various features of this form being incorporated in Lebedev's plays in The Disguise. e) Gerasim infact had converted most references of the original text to adaptations which an average bengali would be acquainted with, thus Don Louis became Bholanath, his servant Bernardo became Ramsantosh, Clara became the disguised Sukhomoy and Clara's servant beatrix became bhagyabati, moreover the city of Madrid and Seville were changed to Lucknow and Calcutta respectively. f) It is also worth mentioning here that the portrayal of the city and its life especially in context to kolkata comes out to a fairly accurate one especially from the perspective of the average middle or lower middle class population, thus leading to references where the city and its people were often referred to on negative terms, a feeling one finds being expressed in many contemporary popular literary and cultural works, especially from those above mentioned classes. g) Interestingly even in context to the attire, makeup and dressing or costume in general one finds in context to the play Lebedev's use of the unique hybrid dressing sense of the contemporary bengali babus being incorporated thus the use of coats with dhoti hats and toga were used along with the more traditional european elements like masks. Even though we do not have any proper description of the kind of audience which had visited his plays one can be fairly certain by virtue of the above mentioned points Lebedev had atleast in earnest tried to attract a native crowd, while in Calcutta this may have been restricted largely to the Anglophile emerging upper middle class. His desires to subsequently form a touring group and cover extensively different parts of rural Bengal expressed his desire in earnest to create a far more heterogeneous audience base.



2. CONCLUSION:

In the Above sections thus I have tries to chart the life and achievements of Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev, A person today revered as the founding father of Bangla Theatre, but as I have tries to point out Gerasim's achievement should not be limited to such an reductive assessment, an in depth analysis of his play and his life thus points to us the actual grativus of his efforts. Thus with the staging of the Disguise in the form and orientation as mentioned above his not only unique because It represented such an experimentation for the first time but because when seen in a broader sense it marked a new philosophical and theoretical development. Thus we see that through such an event Lebedev was able to create a bridge connecting the hitherto divided and different worlds the East and the West , the colony and the metropole with his genuine attempts to attract both bengali and European clientele to his play he thus broke the standard Anglo-Saxon worldview which though considering india to be a 'Crown in its Jewel' maintained an distance and difference to it as an representation of a timeless and untainted civilization which must be left to its own devices. Lebedev thus broke this dominant view by virtue of his theatre in which he poured in all of his life experiences till then thus one sees from his travels through western europe, his mastery of violin in Vienna, his idea from the Volkov theatre to elements of *jatras* and *kobi gaan* and popular Bengali literature and sensibilities all find a place within such an act. Everything thus point's us to the fact one must contextualise his life and work from a rather transnational and transcultural framework as boundaries of nations and distances and differences of cultures are done away and fused together when 'The Disguise' is put before an audience.

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