



INTERVIEW

In conversation with fashion artiste Manish Arora[☆]

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Available online 23 August 2012

Abstract This note anchors Manish Arora's journey by placing it in the twin context of the fashion industry and that of internationalisation from an emerging economy. Creating and managing a fashion brand involves coping with the peculiarities of the fashion industry. Further, Arora's success in gaining a toehold in the global fashion market throws light on the odds that companies from emerging economies face as they venture into advanced international markets.

Context of conversation with fashion artiste Manish Arora

How much would you pay for a scarf? A silk scarf? Better still, how much would you pay for a silk scarf designed by Hermes? Simply put, assigning a price to a fashion good is a gamble. The difficulty in defining the value of a product is just one among the many features that renders the fashion business exciting to fashionistas and interesting to management scholars. Our interest in the creative industries, specifically the fashion sector led to this interview with Manish Arora,

creator of international fashion labels *Manish Arora* and *Fish-Fry* and Deepak Bhagwani, his business partner.¹

Manish Arora is one of the few Indian fashion designers to make a name in the international fashion circuit. Hailing from a conservative business family, Arora's first brush with the world of fashion is at NIFT, India's premier fashion school. His talent and passion for fashion is transformed into a serious business when he partners with Deepak Bhagwani. Arora's international sojourn begins at the London Fashion Week—a landmark in Arora's career as he discovers his distinctive style replete with his trademark colours, embroidery and quirky humour. This not only wins over hard-to-please fashion reviewers but also brings in sales orders from some of the world's top fashion stores. Now a regular at the Paris Fashion Week—the Mecca of Fashion—Manish Arora has his eyes set on creating India's first international fashion brand—a tremendous challenge, as the interview reveals.

Arora's success is exceptional when viewed against the industry in which he operates—the highly idiosyncratic fashion sector. The fashion sector, just as the larger set of

[☆] Reprinted from IIMB Management Review, Vol 20 No 4, December 2008.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Indian Institute of Management Bangalore



¹ The interview was undertaken as part of our research on creative industries. The project has been funded by British Council India.

*cultural industries*² that it belongs to, abounds with peculiarities. Consequently, managing a fashion business involves handling issues far more distinct and ambiguous from those surrounding the production of traditional goods and services.

Catering to fashion consumers is complicated as unlike traditional products that largely serve a utilitarian function (Hirsch, 1972), fashion products serve an aesthetic or expressive function. Here customers derive value from the symbol meaning that is “experienced”, rather than the physical attributes of the product and competition shifts from “use-value” of products to the “symbolic value” or “sign-value” of the products (DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007). As the interview with Arora reveals, fashion connoisseurs treat fashion garments as cultural artefacts. It is the symbolic value of these fashion garments that transforms them from mere clothing items into collectors’ items!

Understandably, such a distinction on the continuum of utility vs meaning, has made the boundaries between symbolic and other traditional products blurred, provisional, and contentious as well (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005). *Is a Rolls Royce a cultural product or a traditional product? What about an i-pod? The growing incidence of diamond encrusted mobile phones, designer mp3 players, high end luxury cars and so on is but a reflection of the growing movement towards “fashionisation” (Peters, 1992), an attempt to construct symbolic meaning around traditional products through design inputs. While in the case of traditional goods, symbolic attributes are relied upon to “differentiate” a product, in the case of creative products, “symbolism” is used for the far more basic purpose of defining a product. Witness how Arora uses colours and embroidery to “define” his garments.*

Arora’s task is further arduous because of the experiential nature of fashion products. It is difficult to predict the demand for a creative product as the customer’s valuation of the product is based on subjective experiences that are unpredictable (Lampel, Land, & Shamsie, 2000), inconsistent and difficult to explain. What appears as “humour” to Arora’s international customers is seen as over-the-top drama by his Indian clientele. Amidst such ambiguous circumstances, fashion designers can only hope to influence demand if not anticipate it. Influencing consumer taste in the fashion industry is no mean task as the fashion industry is characterised by “symmetrical ignorance”³ producers and consumers are equally clueless about what a consumer will value – *nobody knows* (Caves, 2000, p. 3). Arora’s emergence as a trendsetting designer in this difficult-to-predict market is a remarkable testimony to his ability to imbue his products with symbolic meaning that shape and influence consumer preferences.

Far more challenging than embedding symbolic value into fashion garments, is communicating it to consumers.

The consumer’s experience of the fashion product, and consequently his/her decision to spend on a clearly expensive fashion product, is largely dependent on “interpretation” of the product (Lawrence & Phillips, 2002). A carefully constructed network of fashion critics, reviewers and experts interpret the product and influence the consumer to make a “buy” or “no buy” decision. The quirky and edgy designs of Manish Arora that could have easily been dismissed as drama acquire a strong and positive connotation when international stylists proclaim him as India’s answer to Christian Lacroix, the celebrated French fashion designer (Pernet, 2007, p 122). Aware of the strong dependence of his business on fashion reviews, Arora is astute in delaying his debut at Paris by a year. He shows at Paris Fashion Week—the Mecca of Fashion—only when he feels that his work is ready for the fashion ramps of Paris.

Arora’s success in managing a fashion business is non trivial as the fashion business is peculiar in its people composition. As against traditional businesses dominated by workers and managers, the fashion sector is distinguished by the presence of artistes or fashion designers. Artistes, unlike traditional workers, are driven by non-economic motivations (Shorthose & Strange, 2004) ranging from creative inspiration, imagination and passion (Caves, 2000, p. 4) to community development and educational work. They are said to “seek rewards not from the work but in the work, rewards derived not from the product but obtained in the process of production” (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976). They pursue art for art’s sake and “care deeply about the traits of the product” (Caves, 2000, p. 4) to the extent of working on details that consumers may not care for. (Manish Arora delights in incorporating heart shaped motifs into all his clothes just to delight himself!)

The challenge for Manish Arora is not just to perform to his creative potential. Creative tasks require collaboration with other partners (Caves, 2000, p. 1). Putting together a fashion show involves not just diverse creative talents—designers, stylists, models, make-up artistes, fashion accessory designers and so on—but also “traditional” or “humdrum” (Caves, 2000, p. 1) workers such as business managers, public relations (PR) agencies, buyers, sales agents and so on. Collaborating with humdrum workers is not only useful, but also critical. Arora’s collaboration with Bhagwani is critical if he must realise his dream of seeing every man on the street wear Manish Arora.

Research on the fashion sector reveals that despite the complementary nature of the relationship, the collaboration between creative partners and humdrum partners is laced with “inherent tensions” (Scase, 2002). Although conflict is no uncommon issue in the world of collaborations, in the creative industries, this is even more pronounced as potentially conflicting goals of producing both art and wealth are pursued. Fashion designers and business managers and their respective goals of critical acclaim and profitability often appear irreconcilable. While the designer is focused on design perfection and “getting it right at any cost”, the business partner is concerned with the rising material costs of the design studio. Yet the designer must collaborate with the business partner to bring out his work into the market place! This complementary-yet-conflicting relationship is considered

² Cultural or creative industries covers a wide range of activities rooted in the creative arts—design (fashion/interiors), media and entertainment (film, television, publishing and so on), digital (video games, animation), architecture, performing arts (music/dance/theatre/visual arts) and traditional crafts.

³ Traditional businesses are characterised by “asymmetrical ignorance”—producers are more familiar with product features than consumers and can therefore influence consumption by imparting information (see Caves, 2000, for further elaboration).

the “central paradox of creative production” (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007).

In contrast with the history of fashion business which is replete with stories of conflict and eventual fallouts between fashion designers and business partners, the partnership between Arora and Bhagwani appears to be an exception. Unanimous in their credo of not compromising on design excellence, the duo explore ways in which they can leverage their individual strengths to achieve their shared dream of building an international fashion brand. While Bhagwani is conscious of the need to insulate the soul of the business—design—from commercial imperatives, Arora is mindful of the need to make commercially successful designs. It is indeed rare for a fashion house to successfully manage the tightrope walk between indulging the creative instinct as well as financially sustaining such a pursuit!

Arora’s success in making a mark in the international fashion market is even commendable. Firms venturing into international markets out of India would have to battle the well documented *country of origin* bias (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999)—the negative stereotypes about products from emerging economies (a fall out of the negative country image) that typically exists among international customers, especially customers in advanced markets. Bhagwani comments on the low acceptance levels in most international markets for an Indian fashion brand and ingeniously copes with this problem by registering the business in the UK. This helps to dissociate the business from any ethnic associations and signals to customers as well as business partners the organisation’s international identity.

Beyond customer bias, firms from emerging economies have to grapple with additional challenges imposed by their location—extremely small pool of managerial talent with global experience and the poor access to risk capital because of the under developed state of the institutional environment in these economies. These challenges—conceptualised as *liabilities of origin*—dramatically reduce the likelihood of their success in the highly competitive international markets (for a detailed discussion see Ramachandran & Pant, 2007). Bhagwani leverages the collaboration with the UK’s Centre for Fashion Enterprise (CFE) to approach banks that are normally reticent about dealing with Indian designers. Further, Arora does not have the benefit of learning from the domestic market as the Indian fashion industry is nascent. Even within this fledgling industry, very few participate in international markets; those who do focus on catering to ethnic wedding trousseaus of the Indian diaspora—a strong contrast from Arora’s clientele. Thus Arora and Bhagwani had to learn and manage the risks on the fly.

Arora’s achievements are further remarkable as most Indian firms that have successfully battled the liabilities of origin participate predominantly in business-to-business markets, where decision-making is more “rational”.⁴ Arora’s achievement is rare because he operates in the symbolic-value-dominant fashion industry where consumer preferences are typically brand driven. The resource poor Arora devises

ingenious ways of gaining access to resources, markets and building reputational capital. He progressively leverages the platform provided by the various fashion weeks—New Delhi, London and then Paris—to build a reputation for his talent and then seeks to reinforce it (as well gain access to investment and international markets) by partnering with deep pocketed multinationals such as Reebok, Mac and Swatch.

Finally, as the interview reveals, Arora is quick to seize opportunities. *Carpe diem* is more the natural instinct of an entrepreneur than that of a fashion designer! Arora taps on his wide network of social and professional contacts to not only extend his design vocabulary (from crafting garments and shoes to sunglasses) but also to reach newer audiences. Perhaps it is this entrepreneurial outlook that sets Manish Arora apart from other fashion designers.

In conversation with fashion artiste Manish Arora

Manish Arora

Manish Arora is the creator of the international fashion labels *Manish Arora* and *Fish Fry*. A graduate of the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi, Arora shows regularly at the prestigious Paris Fashion Week and retails at renowned fashion stores across the world.

In search of expression

JR/SP: What brought you to the world of fashion?

MA: I come from a very conservative background. My family was into the business of importing saris—even now we have sari shops in Mumbai. I studied commerce at Narsee Monjee in Mumbai. I never was interested in the subject—it was pure torture. I also wanted to get away from Bombay and live alone. Sometime then I read about National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) Delhi in a newspaper, and got my cousin in Delhi to send across an application. Surprisingly, I got a call to attend an interview in Delhi. The interview was quite an experience. I didn’t know then that the people on the interview panel were famous in the field of designing. At that time it didn’t even matter to me who they were. When I was chosen I just left Bombay and got into NIFT without knowing what I was getting into.

JR/SP: How was the experience at NIFT?

MA: At NIFT I felt like a stranger. I didn’t really belong. Most of the students had done so much work before coming to NIFT—fashion designing courses and so on—and I had none of that background. In the first year I even failed in a couple of subjects! But slowly I got used to NIFT.

I was also deeply influenced by a couple of teachers there. What I learnt at NIFT, apart from the basics of apparel designing, was to have patience. I was really impatient back then—I was bad at sketching and that would frustrate me no end. NIFT taught me how to go on and on

⁴ Most notable among them are Bharat Forge and Sundram Fasteners (auto components), Dr Reddy’s Laboratories and Ranbaxy Laboratories (pharmaceuticals), and Infosys Technologies and Wipro Technologies (software industry).

and on. Towards the end of three years I knew I was in the right place and fashion designing was my calling.

I got the "Most Creative Student of the Year" award for my final collection at NIFT, for which I had done a spoof on British costumes, on ball gowns. I turned the gowns round, built them around six characters—a prostitute, a maid, and so on and did things like putting spoons and forks on the maid's corset. The jury liked the newness and originality of the collection. The sense of drama had worked. The collection reflected my penchant for depicting things larger than life. Winning the prize got me a lot of attention overnight. I was wanted.

JR/SP: What did you do after NIFT?

MA: After graduating in 1994 I joined Rohit Bal. Fashion was a small business then, mostly home based. Even the concept of fashion weeks did not exist in India. Each designer did his own show and there wasn't much competition—there were 10–12 designers who were known and Bal was at the top. I think he took me in because I was the NIFT guy who had won an award.

Bal was an outrageous designer in a traditionally Indian way. In my case, my techniques are traditional but my look is contemporary. After two years I left Bal to start on my own. I was very sure I would do it by myself—how or what I would do I didn't know. I wasn't afraid either. While I am paranoid and insecure about myself, I am good at finding solutions.

I then raised some money. Setting up a fashion unit was not too tough then—one needed a few sewing machines, a couple of tailors, a master tailor and a small place to start off. I started off making salwar kameezes. To make ends meet, I was also freelancing for a while.

Things were not as smooth as I had imagined. I knew the kind of clothes I wanted to make, but the business part—the salaries, cheques, labour, government and so on—I had no clue. I was so bad at business that accounts and administration were always in a mess. I mentioned this to Deepak Bhagwani (currently my business partner) who was introduced to me by a common friend and he said, why don't we do something together?

JR/SP: The fashion business, just as any creative business, is infamous for the tension between the creative and business partners. But Deepak and you have stuck it out successfully for almost a decade now. How have you managed it?

MA: I guess that's because we have clearly bifurcated roles. The only thing we do jointly is signing the cheques! I have complete freedom to do what I want and do not worry about the bills. I am just creating all the time and Deepak takes care of everything else. We have no contract between us. We trust each other completely. That of course does not stop us from fighting a lot over anything and everything!

JR/SP: At that point you were still largely selling in India. When did you decide to go international?

MA: I had never imagined that I would go international nor did I have a clue of what was happening internationally. I was just busy making salwar kameezes throughout the year. In 2000, when India Fashion Week began, I started participating there. The fifth India Fashion Week in 2004 changed things for me.

For that show, I wanted to take a step forward... challenge myself. There was also a certain energy within me when I was doing the collection—maybe it was the yoga that I had just started doing then. It may have also been because I wasn't happy with my previous year's collection—the show had been well received. But I was not satisfied myself. My personal opinion matters to me a lot.

The collection that I was planning was about an Indian princess who had gone to Thailand along with Red Indians—a story that I made up. The story is important because it brings clarity, defines my collection and conveys the meaning—to me. It's not as if I know the story entirely before hand—I am experimenting while I am doing it and I am also a part of the process. For the collection, I wanted to use Indian embroideries and Thai accessories. I was also experimenting with colours for the first time. I was so excited about it that I don't think I gave it too much thought. I took all the colours imaginable and went berserk. I did it in a naïve way.

It was an extremely colourful show, possibly the most colourful show ever to be seen in India. That's also when I got to hear that it was very "Indian"! People told me what I was! That show in 2004, just like the NIFT one, changed my life.

Discovering fashion

MA: A person from the British Fashion Council who was at that India show asked me to send samples of my work to the British Fashion Council Jury in London. I did and a month later I got a call saying I was chosen to show at the London Fashion Week. That too as part of the main schedule! A lot of designers are featured at the London Fashion Week but only the listed ones make it to the main schedule. The rest get a chance to showcase in the off schedule. Typically, young designers start with the off schedule. But I was put straightaway into the main schedule—which is a huge deal as many designers never make it there.

Going to London meant a lot. More than the need for creative expression, I think it inspired me to go international and reach everybody.

JR/SP: Breaking into the international fashion circuit—something that few Indian designers have achieved—must have been a huge boost!

MA: Frankly, when I was invited to showcase in London I was scared. In India I was already a star designer; in London, I had to start as a nobody. It's not easy to start as a nobody. Plus there are so many nobodies there — you are the least category of nobody because you are Indian! In my first London show, the stylist—with whom the PR Agency put me in touch—treated me shoddily. I guess she did it because I was not from the UK and perhaps because I was totally ignorant. When I started out in London, I discovered how totally clueless I was about the international fashion scene. My only exposure until that point had been India.

In India, the fashion industry is not very professional yet. Saleability is far more important than design. Selling is also not very challenging since the market is not very discerning about standards and design. It is only now, after the international exposure, that I am more aware of design. Before the show in London, I wouldn't look at silhouettes; I only

made skirts and basic trousers, not really concentrating on complex designs. Basically there are two different ways of making a garment—draping and pattern making. Pattern making, which is the high point of European clothes, involves a lot of technical details. In London, just as in Europe, the culture is pattern making—complicated jackets with crystals and so on. In India, we are mostly concerned with drapes and fall and not fashion making genius. Our pattern making is limited to *kurta* and *lehenga*. One of my initial London reviews even said that the silhouettes were getting lost because of too many embellishments! Of course things are changing in India now...

While internationally, the basic rule is doing collections—spring, summer, fall and winter. Indian designers are not used to even the concept of two seasons. Also, barring Ritu Kumar—who is perhaps one of the most professional and planned designers (even in '95 she had her own stores!)—designers mostly sell whatever is being made at that moment. We don't make a distinction between a collection and a commercial range.

JR/SP: Could you elaborate on that?

MA: Internationally, fashion garments fall into two categories—the collection and the commercial range. You will catch designers constantly working on collections to be shown at major fashion weeks across the world. As soon as one show is over, they start working on the next. From fashion week to fashion week, that's how it goes. The commercial range in turn is derived from the collection. In the commercial range, the theme of the collection is maintained but it is tweaked for the market. For instance, one of the opening designs in my show recently had hundreds of butterflies sewn on the gown. Obviously nobody is going to buy that, so what I do is retain the essence of it and instead make a jacket with embroidery.

In India we mostly make commercial clothes. We make clothes only to sell. I remember, during my days with Bal, we used to do one piece of each design and have different versions and colours. We had agents who would bring us orders, collect the pieces and sell them. This system also means that designers end up doing mostly made-to-order stuff—which is mostly wedding clothes.

When I left Bal I never wanted to do wedding clothes. I basically don't want to do what others want me to do. I want to do what I want to do. I have done wedding collections but for very few people, mostly friends who understand my work. People should come to me for my personality. Money has never been important to me. Designers make so much money making wedding clothes that sometimes they go over the top in their shows. They don't understand that the sensibility of a collection is very different from that of a commercial range. Of course, I discovered all of this only after I went to London.

Now I laugh when I think of those days, but when I went to London I was unaware of things like looks and styling. I was bang in the middle of all of it and discovering it at the same time. It is only when I started selling from London that I also became aware of the famous international fashion stores. It is only after my shows that I came to know people and public relations (PR) in the fashion industry. I learnt the craft, the client and the world of fashion from my international shows.

JR/SP: There you were in London—a highly competitive fashion market—clueless about the international fashion scene. How did you manage the situation?

MA: London is the best place to start for a young designer. London accepts new people and is supportive of new talent. The Centre for Fashion Enterprise (CFE) (A Mayor of London initiative together with University of London), supported me right from the beginning without even checking out my show. The same with my PR agency. I went to them because I was told they would take fresh designers. I first went to a PR agency that handled big brands. I soon shifted to my current one as it was new and smaller, more like my set up. I would have got lost in a big one, whereas here they would do everything for me—we both grew together. When I started off, it was important for me to be with somebody who would have the time for me as I had no clue of how things worked there. In India, we still don't have the concept of agents.

I keep telling my business partner Deepak (Bhagwani), let us become agents to other Indian designers. I want to open an agency that will take Indian designers to international markets.

JR/SP: Why is the PR agency so critical to the fashion business?

MA: The PR agency is quite powerful because it handles the image of the designer, both before and after the show. They PR agencies get a lot of press but their role is not limited to getting publicity; they can do a lot for you internationally. They can make a huge difference to the look of your show itself. They typically have a lot of contacts—stylists, agents, make up artists, modelling agencies and others. Almost everybody I ended up working with for the first show in London was through my PR agency!

The agency also helps you pitch your show correctly. For my first show in London, I was given the 8.30 am slot, which is a disaster as not many show up. An evening show is also not good because there would be no press the next day. My agency managed to get a good slot—between 10 and 11 am. On which day of the fashion week one shows is also very critical. For instance, in Paris, I was offered to choose between the first and the last day. Now the agency really helped me because they know that the first day is typically reserved for newcomers, the last day is the worst and mid week is peak. Currently, in Paris, my show happens on the first day. The agency is pushing to get me the second day. Without an agency I would have not known these things. In the India Fashion Week the day concept doesn't exist—one can pay and get an evening slot.

The PR agency also chooses the venue and makes seating plans. In London, there is a common area—the "tent"—for all shows; alternately you can choose your own venue. You also decide on the location based on the number of people you plan to invite. At first I did it in the tent because it is centrally located, but now I choose my own venue, as the location helps in creating a certain ambience. By the time I reached Paris people already knew me, so I chose my own venue.

Internationally, the shows are listed on the website and people send in requests. The PR Agency also sends out invites. People who confirm participation get seats but there is a hierarchy in seating with things like who gets to sit in the first row, where the media goes and so on. The PR agency takes care of all that. When I did my first show, I had no clue of this. Just as we do in India, I had sent out invites

to everybody I knew in London. My current stylist said that when she entered the show it looked like an Indian bazaar!

JR/SP: How was the response to your first international show?

MA: It was a runaway success. The top fashion journalists from the *Daily Telegraph*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *Vogue* were at my show. I got great reviews. The London show changed things for me overnight. More importantly, I got into the discipline of working on collections and shows, which is how the international fashion scene works.

JR/SP: Can you take us through the routine of preparing for a show?

MA: Once the collection is underway, we start planning for the show. Internationally we can't have very long shows—a show will have not more than 35 garments and the duration of a show would be 13 min. There are buyers who travel across shows—from New York to London to Milan to Paris. We have to grab their attention early, so the opening is very important. The first garment in the show defines the theme of the collection. Nobody will buy the piece but it gets a lot of press. So we try to begin the show with the strong pieces to show them the concept and then release diluted versions, the more commercial versions. In India, it's different—the closing is the most important.

Once the planning for the show begins, other experts come into the picture. Throughout the development of the collection, the stylists work very closely with us, right through setting the theme to finalising each piece. When the pieces are ready, the stylist helps with the final look—which skirt goes with which top and deciding what accessories—bags, shoes, headgear and so on—to use. The stylist also ropes in other companies to get the accessories made. Having a stylist helps you get an outsider's professional point of view. I am open to suggestions but the final decision is mine.

Stylists are also like the agents between the fashion designers and the other experts, make up artist, shoe company and others. A stylist brings her contacts to the designer. A good one can get a designer the best companies to work with—my current stylist, with whom I have worked for the past 4–5 seasons, has Italian contacts and that really helps. Now I feel the need to work with a stylist who will take my work higher. Fortunately, today, stylists are also interested in coming to me.

Once the collection is ready I land up in London or Paris a week before the show. It is only now that models come into the picture. The casting director for the show gets the models for the shows. Internationally all models are affiliated to one modelling agency or the other. The casting director knows the modelling agencies personally, and chooses the models based on the kind of look that the designer wants to portray. For example, in the last show we had masks, so the casting director got us models with strong eyes.

Internationally, there is this infrastructural support and you are not running around doing everything yourself—which is how we all operate in India!

JR/SP: After four years in London, you moved to Paris. Why?

MA: Paris was my dream. The passion to show in Paris was there at the back of my mind when I started working in

India. The Director of *Fédération Française de la Couture* (the governing body of the French fashion industry), Mr Didier Grumbach, who was at one of my London shows invited me to the Paris Fashion Week. I didn't feel ready to show at Paris at that point. I told him I was not ready yet and asked him to give me a year. Exactly a year later, I went to him and said—now I'm ready. Take me there.

When I decided to leave London, the British Fashion Council asked me not to go. The head of the council told me that the council would do whatever I wanted to keep me there. I had already decided I would move to Paris, yet I asked if they would ever give me the "Best British Designer of Year" award. He said no, because I was not English. London gives you all the help and support, but one still feels like an outsider.

Paris is different. There are many others from everywhere—Japanese, Russians and Americans. It doesn't matter where you come from, all that matters is your work. I feel free in Paris, I do whatever I want. In that sense, I was quite happy to leave London.

JR/SP: How was the experience of showing in Paris?

MA: After my first show in Paris, I came backstage and started crying—the build up was too much, there was too much tension. For the first time I had a lot of Indian journalists with me backstage. I did a lot of interviews for television and press. They were totally surprised with the kind of response the show received and the emotions my show had evoked—it was just like in India except that they were French.

Now I'm in Paris and have no intention of going anywhere. I want to settle down here and belong here. I have done two shows in Paris, and now I want to become a member of the federation there. Right now I'm just an invitee but as an associate member I have a right to show.

London is great for new talent, New York is good for big numbers, Milan is more about shoes and bags. And Paris is the design capital. Paris is every fashion designer's ultimate dream.

Brand "Manish Arora"

JR/SP: The fashion weeks are used to seeing a lot of good, fresh talent burst on to the scene every season. Yet your work stood out. What, about your work, do you think, appealed to the international audiences?

MA: My colours and embroidery were a huge hit. I realised that I was clicking because I was Indian. My work may look international, but it is very India centric—the techniques, the fabric and the embroideries. Internationally our embroideries, colours and textiles are much sought after. The variety and techniques we have are tremendous and so unique to us—our handmade textiles haven't been copied by the Chinese yet! Even when most of the international brands—by the way over 95% of them get clothes made in India—use embroidery, they do it in a very regular way. The advantage I have as an Indian designer is that the technique belongs to me so I can experiment.

My colours were the other high point. The first thing people notice about my designs is colour. I'm surprised when people wonder how I do it. I do it without being aware of what I'm doing; I am doing it naturally. Pink is my

favourite. I try to use it in every collection—even if I don't try it comes from somewhere! I'm very proud of the fact that I am held responsible for bringing colour to everybody's life! I think Indians are born with colours. For us it is so natural to put on red, green and pink together and walk out into the streets confidently. Luckily my parents couldn't afford to send me abroad to study. I wouldn't have had the Indian-ness which is critical to my present success. Being Indian is the best thing that has happened to me.

JR/SP: The current fancy for the "Indian exotic" must also be working in your favour?

MA: Well... internationally I am consistently selling well in all the big stores. International buyers do find my designs ethnic, but that's not what brings them. People don't buy me because the clothes are "Indian". Exotic India does appeal to foreign customers, but only for some time. I can't do *India* all the time in the international markets. On the contrary, I'm trying to keep myself from doing the Indian-Indian thing. My London collection was "Made in India", but not Indian clothes! Just using all the embroidery techniques we have in India or duplicating Indian designs won't do. The idea should be exceptional. Once I used an *Amar Chitra Katha* story for an entire embroidery sequence—the international audience got it. They get my ideas—something that amazes me because it is not that I have trained abroad!

I think what they like about me is that my designs are totally new and different. The technique might be Indian, but the idea and the way I use the technique is very very contemporary and unusual. My shows are full of ideas, sometimes just too many ideas—but that is India. We are chaotic. "Too many" is a Western notion. For me nothing is too much. I'm only doing what I am. It is as basic as that and I love it and it shows in my work. This spring-summer I made this dress which has 1500 individually embroidered butterflies that glow in ultraviolet light. It was put on the window at Harrods for three months! With every collection I explore a new technique. I decided to do the Paris collection with Kashmir embroidery but with different motifs—not the regular motifs that one associates with Kashmir embroidery. In another collection I have used traditional mirror work to create an optical illusion. It's a space fantasy, a modern design which has not been seen ever before. I am now developing motifs of Japanese warriors in Banaras hand woven fabrics. If I use the fabric in the traditional Banaras design, that would be ethnic. And it won't sell. But Japanese warrior in Banaras style will sell. The interesting part is I have managed to get traditional Banaras weavers excited about it. Banaras has genius master weavers but it took us a while to cultivate them, because they haven't been outside Banaras. But then they see something new as a challenge and they get excited. Now the Banaras people come to all my shows in India!

Even when people don't understand the design element in my work, they understand the emotion behind it. There's a strong element in my designs which is easily identified with me. While it is so important to have a different theme and look, it is even more important to have your own style.

JR/SP: What defines the Manish Arora style today?

MA: Humour... ideas... Indian-ness... and colour.

JR/SP: Has it changed over the years?

MA: In some ways 1994 to 2008 is the same, but yet different. When I look at the portfolio that I prepared during my interview at NIFT, I can see a similarity in my concepts. My design ideas have changed since then but the concepts and themes are still essentially "me". The sense of humour and the abundance of ideas have always been there, but in terms of techniques, there has definitely been a marked change. For instance, I never did embroidery when I began, but today it is a defining aspect of my style. I was never as big on colours as I am now. I didn't bother with silhouettes, but now am consciously working on them.

But more than the technique, I think my attitude towards fashion has changed. When I was 20–25 I loved to take the fizz out of everybody. I sold ridiculous fabrics and pulled it off. It was a joke. Now it's more intense. My work's getting more and more deep. Now I am more responsible. After London Fashion Week, I realised that fashion designing was not a joke, it had to be done seriously. But that doesn't mean the clothes should look serious!

I remember incorporating humour and happiness in my collections in the very early days. Unflattering and scary clothes are not my scene. I want people who see my shows to be happy. I am a very happy person myself. I like humouring myself. For instance, this jacket that I recently showed had more than 10,000 handmade leather hearts. I have a fascination for hearts — it is my fantasy. Every collection has hearts in a different way. Nobody else is probably noticing it, but I like doing things just for me.

I even wrap social messages in a very quirky manner. I tried this once in one of my shows during Fashion Week in India. Being gay is not normal in India, but then India is the only country where two men can hold hands and hug in public without being gay! I took pictures of these and put it on my clothes — it worked. It is a social cause for me—it had drama and humour. I am not intentionally dramatic. Humour is me—everything has to be fun and twisted.

JR/SP: Do people get the humour?

MA: Internationally people get the humour but the Indian audience thinks of it as "drama". At times I do feel bad when critics dismiss it as "drama". It is actually my sense of humour! In India we think of fashion as frivolous. Internationally, fashion journalism is a serious business. It took one of the top fashion journalists who has been writing for 30 years just a few minutes to point out the one thing about my designs that I was insecure about. That's amazing. There designers are treated as legends and gods, bigger than film stars and politicians.

JR/SP: Internationally, fashion houses dress up movie stars and celebrities to get publicity. Would Bollywood stars be a great opportunity for you to appeal to the Indian market?

MA: No. I don't like celebrity driven PR. I am wary of ending up as their "ladies' tailor"! If celebrities want my designs then I'll give it to them—but I won't push myself. I did try Bollywood once and left midway. I wanted no money, no credits. My fashion sensibility is very different. I would work on a movie where clothes as a concept are important. My clothes should enhance the personality of the person.

JR/SP: Who is the quintessential Manish Arora customer?

MA: My collection is definitely not for the faint hearted! The woman who wears my clothes is somebody who has a strong personality, is adventurous, isn't shy, who stands out in a crowd and likes being the centre of attraction. Bianca Jagger is my style icon. Somebody like Beyonce would also be a perfect woman for my brand.

JR/SP: Is it the Western woman that you have in mind when you design clothes?

MA: Not exactly, but I guess that's how it ends up. Western customers are bold and they can carry off my clothes in a crowd. Also, in international fashion there are very few who use colours as much as I do. So they like it. Internationally, customers also look at fashion as a form of art. They look for hand-made quality and the effort—they frame garments and put it on the wall as a collector's item. I love that. I want to reach people who appreciate it and keep it for life. People should show off Manish Arora.

JR/SP: The biggest risk fashion designers face is their designs being copied. How do you handle it?

MA: I do see many designers trying to copy my work. For instance, I can see a lot of colour happening now—but then, it's not easy to copy me. There's a strong element in my designs which is easily identified with me, which is different from the others. In any case, I don't see others copying my style as something negative. I am always open about what I do. I allow fellow designers to have a look at what I'm working on. I think it's better as it stops them from doing what I am doing. Also, with me, my themes are so unusual that I am sure not many can even copy them.

The business of fashion

JR/SP: How do you arrive at the idea or the theme for a collection?

MA: My collection is largely influenced by the phase I am going through. I did the *Life is Beautiful* collection when I did the Art of Living course. My collection on the space age has black as the base because everybody associates me with colours, and I wanted to do something different. But my black is colourful – even if I do white, it will be “my” white!

My themes have almost always clicked and I have been featured as a trend setter on leading fashion and fashion research websites such as style.com and wgsn.com. Style.com has featured the *Warrior* as the latest trend for next winter.

JR/SP: If the theme is something so personal, then how do you explain fashion trends? How is it that the designer's personal expression turns into an international trend?

MA: Let me give you an example. I generally make it a point to know what designers are doing internationally with fabrics, colours and designs. Since there is nobody to guide me I religiously go through each and every international show and collection just to know what's happening. Last spring–summer I realised nobody had done the 70s silhouette look for a long time. So I did it. You basically take a lot

of risk, it may or may not work. The same thought process can be seen with a lot of big brands such as Dior, Dolce & Gabbana, Missoni and so on, as well. Once the shows are done, magazines and journals pick out the dominant themes and that becomes the trend. Mid market brands copy the theme and it then enters the market at the mass level. By next spring–summer Levis will probably come up with wide bottom jeans, and Zara with 70s tops and full length dresses. So the 70s look will stay for some time.

Choosing a theme can be tricky. Sometime back I did have ideas about a collection on HIV, but for that I would have had to do a conceptual show, something less commercial. I eventually dropped the idea; I cannot forget that the shows I do are business shows where clothes are sold.

JR/SP: Sounds paradoxical! One the one hand there is designer's need to remain true to her/his creative expression, on the other hand the need to meet market expectations

MA: The inspiration for a collection is mostly very personal...inspired. But the moment we start working on the collection, we always keep the buyers in mind. Let's be honest here, I am in the business of fashion and people on the streets wearing Manish Arora is important! I'd make clothes hoping people will appreciate them and buy them. Earlier we did our own thing—I'd do what I thought would look good. Now we actually plan a process—a collection will have a certain number of skirts, tops, full length pieces, basic T shirts, some commercial items and so on. We ensure a good mix of all kinds of garments. It is important that the collection caters to every geographical market. For example, my collection will always have some full length pieces because that's what gets picked in the Middle East.

Once we finalise the collection, we make a presentation to buyers. We show them sketches, descriptions and working sheets of the garments and discuss the options that we are willing to offer. For instance, we tell them we can also make a long skirt in this print or a short skirt in another style, and so on. But if a customer wants something outside the options we offer—this print and that look and that cut—I can't help much. I refuse to make alterations to the design. I put the embroidery wherever I want, and not according to the customers' whims. Internationally everybody understands this and adapts to the design and style. Of course nobody in India has a concept like that.

JR/SP: How do you find the buyers?

MA: Buyers travel around the world looking for designers, attending fashion shows and placing orders with us at the shows. Order bookings mostly happen during fashion week. I meet most of my buyers there. Once the Paris Fashion Week closes, the collection then travels to the fashion weeks in London, New York and Milan. Since it is the same set of buyers who attend all the shows I do only one show internationally and that's in Paris.

Paris is the hub, so it is quite common for UK or even US buyers to order from Paris. It helps if the collection travels because sometimes the same store chains have different buyers. At the end of all the shows, all the orders—those from direct buyers and from sales agents—are put together and executed.

JR/SP: Sales agents? Are they different from buyers?

MA: Sales agents are quite different from buyers. We don't just rely on direct buyers. Sales agents are a must in France, the US and the UK (France takes care of the rest of the world markets). They put our collections in showrooms, sell them and collect a commission – of about 12% – on sales. Sales agents also give us a lot of tips—try to make less heavy garments, less embroidery, and so on. I also visit my stores in India to see the display and have a chat with the sales girls—I get useful inputs such as, this colour didn't sell—which I keep in mind while planning the next collection.

Doing a show is one thing and selling is completely different. The show is for fashionistas, but for buyers, the wearability factor of clothes is critical. For instance, in India I try to show the same international collection, but my stall may have exclusively Indian wear collection.

JR/SP: Why do you show in India?

MA: I always show in India Fashion Week. India is a growing market and also I want share with everybody in India what I am doing internationally. It's also my way of saying thanks to Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI). If fashion week as a concept did not exist in India, my journey would have been longer. India Fashion Week helped me get noticed internationally.

Fashion forward**JR/SP: What next for Manish Arora?**

MA: We started with six people and today we have 250 people. We had a five lakh rupee loan and now we have three crores. But there is just so much work to do and so much running around that we frankly don't have the time to think or analyse. We just go on. I am restless right now, hungry for the next big thing. Being dissatisfied is important. I want more. I want to be known for making fashion an experience, a luxury. I want to design garments with emotions. I want to be known for bringing back the old glory of fashion to today's world. You have only one life—it's about showing what look you create that nobody else can.

I have a dream—I want to make one product which is so good that people have to have it; they should have no choice but to own it. I want books written about me, somebody to design in my name. I wish I was 17 and starting all over again. There would be so much more time—I already feel I'm running late in my world. I'm 35 and I want to do more and more.

JR/SP: What is the constraint?

MA: Currently both money and networks. I am broke all the time. It costs about Rs 85 lakhs for a show in Paris!

JR/SP: Why not take in outside investment?

MA: Quite a few have expressed interest in investing in us in the past—but something told us, not yet. I think we are ready now. Deepak would want us to do it right away but I would wait for two more seasons. Ideally I want to be a complete designer who has his clothing line, perfumes, a complete house and I am waiting to become a little more famous before I get into accessories and perfumes. Increasingly fashion conglomerates are taking over new

designers—McQueen, McCartney, Kenzo are all part of PPR or LVMH. I would want a big Fashion conglomerate to take me over. If that happens I can have the best models, producers, product, distribution, stores and so on. I want to partner with somebody who believes in me.

JR/SP: Why not seek investment from Indian business houses?

MA: I have not looked at tie-ups in India because I need somebody to market me worldwide. India is a very important market, but I don't want to be restricted to the Indian market. I am very proud to be Indian, but I want to be sold globally.

I would be also wary of tying up with big Indian business corporations as I am not sure they will bring international exposure for us. International brands will do exactly what they need to popularise me and take me places. Reebok and Mac chose me just by looking at what I was doing internationally. The minute I am internationally established, India will view me even better. I want to be the first Indian to make a global Indian brand.

JR/SP: Will it be a luxury brand?

MA: If "expensive" means "luxury", then yes, Manish Arora is a luxury. Come to think of it, luxury hardly exists in international fashion today. Luxury is one of a kind, that which is made especially for you. Today just the way everybody has a TV set, fridge and so on, everybody has a Louis Vuitton in Paris.

I want certain exclusivity to Manish Arora. I don't want to be easily accessible. I do want people on streets wearing Manish Arora but I would want to reach out to them through different channels. While the flagship brand Manish Arora will be expensive, Fish Fry for Reebok by Manish Arora will be affordable. If a Manish Arora creation is available for Rs 5000, then the customer who buys my clothes for Rs 50,000 will feel cheated. Also I can't have Manish Arora in every mall because people won't buy from there, but Reebok can have Fish Fry for Reebok in a mall.

JR/SP: Do you see anybody other than Manish Arora designing for the Manish Arora brand?

MA: Impossible. Nobody else will be able to do it. Nobody understands me. People need to get used to you to understand you. In India an assistant designer will not last for more than two years. I get 15 to 20 emails from young designers everyday saying they want to work with me. I tell them to explore and think. I want them to understand what life is after school. I tell them how to do it right, to learn to face the world and most of all, get out of the Indian mode of being a designer. I try to tell people look into our past, our history and come out with something new. Take from your country and do new things. They get fed up of the pressure and leave! I hope things will change as fashion in India gets more organised.

JR/SP: What is different about Manish Arora the designer?

MA: I am, perhaps, the first Indian to be doing collaborations—be it with Mac, Swatch or Walt Disney. When it comes to invitations for collaboration I am always ready, whether it is Reebok or a block printer!

My first collaboration was with Reebok—*Fish Fry for Reebok*. I met Reebok's MD Mr Subinder Singh in the Reebok shop in Delhi where I had gone shopping for sports shoes for

an upcoming show. He introduced himself and said he wanted me to work on their apparel range but at that point I wanted to work on shoes. I went to their factory at Sonapat and got whatever I wanted done for my show. Subinder loved what I had done and I went into collaboration with Reebok for shoes and garments. Reebok is expecting sales of Rs 5 to 10 crores just from my S/S-08 collection.

The collaborations are also helping me go international. The Reebok collection did so well that they took it to the US. For Mac, I'm packaging and developing colours for a set of two—lipstick, lipgloss, eye shadow and other items. Mac approached me with the idea offering a Manish Arora counter at all Mac outlets across the world. After the London Fashion Week I asked Mac to sponsor me—which they continue to do—they provide a team of 25 make up artistes as well as their products for all my shows. Now that Mac is coming to India, it works very well for them too to work with me.

Whoever I have worked with wants to work with me again. It's the relationship I have built over time. The secret is to let go and join hands. Indian designers don't think like that. No Indian designer has collaborations. I don't know the reason. For that matter international brands don't want Indians either for it would limit them.

JR/SP: What draws the big brands to collaborate with you?

MA: I have a presence in other countries. Also, what sets me apart is my willingness to experiment and my ability to jump from one idea to another. My ideas set me apart. Every moment I am thinking of something new, something original. An Indian company wanted to me do all the accessories for ipods—I'm willing to think about it. We work with any kind of medium—recently we created a garment out of foam! It is challenging to move from one medium to another. It is exciting. I love the work, it is not just fashion. It is freedom of expression, I look at it as art. If not fashion, it could be films or art.

JR/SP: Where does your confidence come from?

MA: It's a façade. As a child I was the worst of the lot. I was not the star of the family. That's why perhaps I did all this. I wanted to be a success. Sometimes I thank God that my childhood was like that!

JR/SP: As always, seeing an opportunity in adversity! Thank you Manish for sharing your journey with us. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Fashioning a business

Deepak Bhagwani, Business Partner and Co-director, Three Clothing Co (the company that owns the Manish Arora and Fish Fry labels)

JR/SP: Why did you choose to partner with Manish Arora?

DB: Manish and I go back a long way. Even when we were not working together I saw his shows and loved them. I love Manish's spirit—his daring and his risk taking capacity. When I saw him struggling with his business, I felt the need to help him. Incidentally, I come from a family that has been in the traditional textile business in Rajasthan for years.

When we started working together, we bonded really well. We know each other's strengths. Together, we had the capability and the ability, with freedom for the creative and business aspects being total. Manish has tremendous energy and innovation. He does great designs, is good with publicity and marketing—he has a tremendous personality. I don't interfere with the creative aspect of his work. My job is to take his work out into the world and not tell him what the world wants to see! Having said that, let me also say we have many arguments over the commercial viability of his designs.

JR/SP: Striking a balance between the design component and the affordability factor of the garments must be quite a challenge. How do you manage this?

DB: We work on one basic principle—we never compromise with the design. I see a lot of opportunity to make the business profitable without interfering with the soul of our business, which is design.

Fortunately, Manish trusts me with this. He understands that I am good at managing the brass-tacks of the business. For instance, when we started working together, I noticed that the entire fashion industry was quite disorganised. Designers were pricing clothes according to their whims and fancies, they were not doing the costing or calculation! I told Manish that I needed to know how much we spent on each garment and needed to put a percentage on top of it to arrive at the price. Manish understood.

We also started keeping tight control on our costs. When we moved to our new factory in Noida three years ago, I wanted us to switch to 12 h work shifts—9 to 9, which no fashion designer was doing. The fixed cost was the same, but we achieved more production. Now we are trying hard to work round the clock, which is very difficult in the apparel space as a garment has to be completed by one tailor, else variations in the style of different tailors will reflect in the piece. We are trying to figure out how to avoid this.

On the retail front, after the retail boom in India, we stopped the consignment business and started selling from our own stores. Opening our own stores worked for us. We grew from a turnover of just Rs 81,000 (2001) to 14 lakhs (2002) and about Rs 63 lakhs (2003) all through the domestic business!

One thing we have always known—simply making glamorous clothes won't do. We have to ensure value for money and timely delivery as well. We have never delayed our shipments, ever.

JR/SP: Value-for-money in the fashion industry? How do you arrive at this considering that the sky is the limit when it comes to pricing fashion goods?

DB: When Manish started in 1997, he launched the “Manish Arora” brand which was basically Indian wear. We were priced at the higher end of the market – which was right considering the kind of work that went into a Manish Arora garment. Moreover, it takes a long time to put a Manish Arora garment together. The brand’s identity is in innovative embroideries. Manish Arora garments are highly embellished; the garments take time to make and it adds to the costs because it requires lots of labour.

When I joined Manish, I was very sure that I wanted everybody to walk into a store and come out with a Manish Arora garment. It was important to make Manish’s work popular. Moreover, Manish is a very quirky designer—if we priced him on par with other designers, we might not have sold him.

We decided to do something different and started a sub label Fish Fry—Indian contemporary fashion. Those days it was rare for fashion designers in India to have sub label. Manish Arora was for Indian wear and Fish Fry for street wear with a real edge...western wear skirts, tops, T shirts. The price points and design ethos were different. With Fish Fry, we were the least expensive among all the designers.

JR/SP: So what do you retail internationally – Manish Arora or Fish Fry?

DB: When we wanted to sell internationally, we brought out Manish Arora as the main brand. Internationally that is how fashion brands are built, first the designer’s name is established and then the sub label.

We also realised that one can’t build a brand by just putting a tag on the clothes. Building a brand requires heavy investments. We went all out in establishing the Manish Arora Fish Fry brand. In India, in 2004, we spent Rs 5,00,000 during India Fashion Week, in London in 2005 it became Rs 35,00,000. And now two years later we are spending 3 crores, including sponsorships, to just establish the brand. To participate in the Paris show alone we spend over a crore!

We have begun to feel that it is working. Today, Manish Arora, the brand, has a strong individual identity. We have managed to create a distinct feel around it, be it the carry bag, packaging or other aspects. We have what it takes to create an independent standalone brand.

JR/SP: Showing at London helped to establish Manish as a promising designer. But when did it all begin to translate into commercial success?

DB: We had tested out the commercial viability of our designs in international markets much before Manish showed in London. We had been exporting to overseas markets prior to showing at London Fashion Week. Showing in London, with no clue of international markets, could have been a risky affair, considering how expensive shows are and the kind of impact that can have on the designer’s image and career.

In 2002, we exhibited in a trade fair called Who’s Next! in Paris and again in 2003 at a trade fair called AREA which supports independent designers who have no money – that still exists now. We exhibited 25 to 35 garments and had some Middle East buyers come over to Paris, instead of coming to India, and buy. Maria Luisa (from the famous Parisian store Maria Luisa) who had seen us at the India Fashion Week in Bombay in 2003 and had ordered earlier also came to the AREA exhibition. She placed orders with us again and recommended that we go through sales agents and introduced us to our current agents/showroom. We had to give the agents/showroom E4800 as minimum guarantee even if we didn’t sell and a 12% commission on sales. We delivered all the orders in time as we knew this was serious business. We were sold out in Maria’s store! This impressed the agents too. It gave us the confidence that given an opportunity, we would succeed in international markets.

JR/SP: Was the experience in the international markets any different after the London show?

DB: Showing in London helped in more ways than one. When Manish went to London for the first time, we were funded by the CFE which supports talented but fund-strapped new designers from the UK. Suran Goonatilake, who was on the board of the CFE, mooted the idea of funding a designer from any country, not just the UK, as long as he is designing in the UK. That way the UK government would get its taxes and the British design industry would benefit. It was perfect for us. We gave the CFE (a non-profit organisation) a 10% stake of our new London based company and got in return, office space and an amount of 32 lakh rupees (non returnable) to plough into the London shows. The valuation per se was insignificant but it provided us with a base which is critical for international business to grow. Europe is a great market—fashion is highly developed there and perhaps an Indian Fashion brand with production in India would work there. However, unlike Europe, to get the rest of the world to buy high fashion Indian brands is difficult. For instance, I cannot sell in Australia or South America as an Indian High Fashion brand. So all our invoices go out of the UK. International stores love a European address and bank account. It’s comforting! It also gave us a standing in any bank in London- because we were not “Indians” approaching the bank - as the University of London has a stake in CFE and we were part of the CFE.

After showing at London Fashion Week what really made things different was that international buyers/customers started viewing Manish Arora as an international brand that has its origins in India. It has increased the brand’s awareness in the domestic markets and internationally.

JR/SP: Finally, as the business head, what would you attribute your success to?

DB: I believe that the real reason for our success is that we have always been bullish about ourselves.

JR/SP: Thank you Deepak. The Indian fashion industry too appears to be bullish on you both!

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