

## **Ambedkar and Indian Nationalism**

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This paper looks very briefly at the question of why Indian nationalism is not a homogeneous ideology, and why Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's often conflict-ridden relationship with the elite dominated nationalism cannot be seen as a lack of anti-colonial sentiments in Dr. Ambedkar. But the main thrust of the paper will then be on how first elite, mainly north Indian savarna nationalist leaders constructed an image of Dr. Ambedkar. That will be followed by an examination of certain nationally recognised textbooks on modern India, especially the freedom struggle, to show how, till the reassertion of dalit struggles from the 1970s, there was a discursive attempt to erase the memory of B.R. Ambedkar as a significant figure in Indian history. Finally, there will be a brief analysis of the discussions over the last few decades, where attitudes have swung between appropriation of Dr. Ambedkar by either the RSS or the Congress, or acute vilification. It is, therefore, not Dr. Ambedkar's own ideas, but the ideas of elite nationalism vis-à-vis Dr. Ambedkar as a major spokesperson of the oppressed castes, that is being examined.

The seemingly innocent title of my paper is in fact a highly troublesome one. Firstly, one needs to question whether there was only one Indian nationalism, and if so, whether that ideology encompassed the whole of India. In this short article, I can only touch upon some key issues. So, let me begin by suggesting the problem involved in having discussions when one is asked to compare Ambedkar with Gandhi and Nehru. At one level, this implies that Ambedkar cannot be studied as a stand-alone figure. At another level, it pushes an unwary reader (which means most savarna and other non-Dalit readers, as I hope to show later in my paper) into looking at Ambedkar necessarily as at best a footnote to, or a partial

critique of, a greater entity called mainstream nationalism. In recent times, this has perhaps been best exemplified on one hand by Shourie's attacks on Ambedkar, and on the other hand by the Navayana-Arundhati Roy *Annihilation of Caste* episode.

We however need to go back to the days of Ambedkar, and even beyond it, to question the hegemonic discourses. The construction of Indian nationalism, notwithstanding the divergences within it, from rabid Hindu nationalism to the Gandhian or even the Nehruvian models, remained the work of elites. In their reconstruction of the past, as a necessary component of the view of India, crucial areas of similarity existed. For lack of space, I offer brief remarks from Nehru's *Discovery of India*. On caste, this is what he says about its origins: "Out of this conflict and interaction of races gradually arose the caste system, which, in the course of succeeding centuries, was to affect Indian life so profoundly. ... It brought degradation in its train afterwards, and it is still a burden and a curse, but we can hardly judge it from subsequent standards or later developments" (Nehru 84-85). Nehru goes on with elaborations and qualifiers, but these add up to three basic points:

1. Other countries also had such divisions (which presumably exculpates elite oppressors both of India and of other countries)
2. Indian mind was extraordinarily analytical, hence the reverence for Brahmins (Nehru 86).
3. While some Brahmins may have had their share of vice, their record of public service, their personal sacrifice for the public good, gained them public esteem.

In a later part of the same work, he argued that apart from a 'small number' of untouchables, caste for the rest was not very bad. It even permitted democracy in society (Nehru 254-256). But, we are told, caste today is bad (Nehru 257). So what sets Nehru apart from the more conservative elements is more a critical position for the present, but his positive appreciation of caste in the past of the nation undercuts much of that critical stance. On the nature of nation and nationalism, Nehru has this to say: "Hindu nationalism was a natural outgrowth from the soil of India, but inevitably it comes in the way of the larger nationalism which rises above differences of religion or creed" (Nehru 272). And it is in the Maratha empire that he sees Hindu nationalism, and indeed a strong attachment to the nation as a whole. For this, he quotes as authority Warren Hastings. Interestingly, just a little later, he notes the attempts by Mysore under Haider and Tipu to resist the expansion of

British power, the non-response of the Marathas to Mysore's attempts at forming an all-India alliance, but evidently saw no contradiction between this role of the Marathas and his ascription to them of being the only people to have national aims. He then proceeds to mention the defeat of the Marathas in 1818 as the end of Indian independence (Nehru 275).

My intention here is not to point simply or primarily to specific shortcomings or errors in this reconstruction. Rather, it is to draw attention to the assumption that there was already a nation in India, and the tussle between the Marathas and the East India Company represented very simply the nation and the coloniser. So, when discussing this process history gets simplified into a confrontation between those who are for the nation and those who are for the colonisers. At this juncture, therefore, let me bring in one incident. This is the Battle of Koregaon, on 1 January 1818.<sup>1</sup> [1] About 834 soldiers of the Company resisted the Peshwa's forces. Baji Rao II had about 20,000 Horse and 8,000 Infantry soldiers, though probably not the entire force had been thrown into battle. But after 12 hours of fighting the Peshwa's troops withdrew, and this retreat was a major component in the eventual defeat of the Marathas at the Third Anglo-Maratha war. The bulk of the Company's soldiers consisted of Mahars. Mahars had been previously used extensively by Shivaji. But the extreme Brahminical Peshwas had oppressed the Mahars and others. We need to remember that under Peshwa domination, untouchables had to enter Poona with a broom tied behind them to sweep up the dust they trod, and a pot hanging from their necks to catch any spit.

It was the Brahminical domination that made Peshwa rule much less than national, as much as the robbery and plunder in non-Maratha held territories. Bengali folk memory even now remembers the depredations caused by Bargir violence. And it was this casteism that made military service under the British so much more valuable to Mahars than a 'nationalism' that would suggest that only after British rule had ended could the so-called upliftment of the depressed classes begin. Indeed, a Mahar leader like Ambedkar would find such a notion of upliftment utterly unacceptable.

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<sup>1</sup>This was written originally several years ago, when the Battle of Koregaon had not come into left and liberal discourses so much. Subsequently, we have had Anad Teltumbde claiming that the battle has been turned into a myth by Dalits, and other Dalit writers responding to him. For a sharp response to Teltumbde see Ratnesh Katulkar, "[Bhima Koregaon is History not a Myth: A Rejoinder to Teltumbde's Lies](#)," in *Round Table India*, 9 January 2018.

The slightly over a century long period when Mahars were recruited into the British army (from the 1750s to 1893) was a vital period for them. This career gave many of them better income, as well as education. As a result, they would fight for a long time to get themselves reinstated in the army. Ambedkar himself was the son, as we know, of a Mahar soldier. Army regulations did not positively support caste discrimination, even if it was not rooted out. Ambedkar tells us of the shock with which he received the full impact of untouchability, as follows. “The first incident which I am recording as well as I can remember,” writes Ambedkar, “occurred in about 1901 when we were at Satara. One summer day my elder brother, my nephew set out to meet our father who worked as a cashier at Goregon. We got in at Padali railway station. Due to some reason father did not receive our coming letter in time, so he could not come to receive us. After waiting for long weary hours, we could with difficulty persuade the station master, who was a caste Hindu, to secure us a bullock-cart, and started for Goregaon. Hardly had the cart gone a few yards when the god-fearing caste Hindu cartman, to his wrath came to know that the well-dressed boys in his cart are the accursed untouchables! In a fit of rage, he threw us on the road as one overturns the dustbins, for he felt we had polluted his wooden cart and destroyed the purity of his domestic animals” (Ambedkar, *The Essential Writings* 52).

For those of us, like a Chattopadhyay, a Bengali bhadrlok heir to over two centuries of privilege, it is easy to construct a nationalism where there are precise sequences, and overcoming backwardness of the ‘lower’ castes will be seen as something that is ‘naturally’ going to take time. It is understandable why a Mahar like Dr. Ambedkar would find such a perception a de facto attempt at keeping his community permanently oppressed. This is what gave rise to a very clear difference in how Ambedkar viewed British rule and the elite nationalists, and what his nationalism looked like, and what the nationalism of Gandhi, Patel or Nehru looked like. In his *Annihilation of Caste*, he stressed that the Smritis and Shastras were not the embodiment of religion but a system of rules to deprive the untouchables even of their basic needs and deny them equal status in the society. Therefore, he said that there is no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed and there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion that discriminates against its own people whom it bracketed as untouchables. This was clearly a very different approach, and

this motivated him to negotiate with the British on his own terms, rather than on the terms of the elite nationalists. In this paper, my subsequent aim is not to look at Ambedkar's own work, and the reasons why he did so. Rather, my aim is to look at the nationalist discourses *about* Ambedkar.

Gandhi was quite hostile to Ambedkar in a basic way. Someone who had, for years, been able to stomach Malaviya and other Hindu nationalists, he was absolutely unwilling to accept the position of Ambedkar that the cause of emancipation of the depressed classes could not follow guidelines set from above by elites, and compulsorily within Hinduism. This accounted for both his reaction to *Annihilation of Caste*, a matter into which I cannot go in details, and for his other reactions to Ambedkar. It is worth remembering two of them. One of course is his opposition to the separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. I will subsequently look at how later nationalist writers have treated the episode. What is significant for me is, Gandhi declared a fast against this, but not against a separate electorate for Muslims. In other words, it was *not* from a 'liberal-democratic' position that every individual should be equal, all must be seen solely as abstract citizens, that he opposed the separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. I say nothing unknown in this. But the implications must be underlined. He was objecting to the separation of the most oppressed social layers among the Hindus from their oppressors. And his solution to the problems they faced was oppressive at both the political and the social level. Politically, the creation of reserved seats with general votes meant hobbling the Dalits. It would for a long time be the case that only Dalits certified by Savarna leaderships would get through, and even then they would be treated as lesser beings. The social aspects of his reforms of course covered a call to abolish untouchability, but along with that so-called reforms among the untouchables which included the imposition of brahmanical codes. A key issue for him was his attempt to impose vegetarianism, especially calling a halt to beef eating. As he wrote:

Cow preservation is an article of faith in Hinduism. No Harijan worth his salt will kill cattle for food. *But having become untouchable*, he has learnt the *evil habit* of eating carrion. He will not kill a cow but will eat with the greatest relish the flesh of the dead cow. *It may be physiologically harmless. But psychologically there is nothing, perhaps, so repulsive as carrion eating.* And yet,

when a dead cow is brought to a Harijan tanner's house, it is a day of rejoicing for the whole household. Children dance round the carcass, and as the animal is flayed, they take hold of bones or pieces of flesh and throw them at one another ... the whole family is drunk with joy at the sight of the dead animal. I know how hard I have found it working among the Harijans to wean them from the *soul-destroying* habit of eating carrion (Gandhi, *Village Industries* 26).

And few nationalist writers on the right or the left saw this dimension for what it was, as I propose to show.

Gandhi's distrust of Ambedkar continued. Ambedkar's critical stance towards the Poona Pact, which he felt he had been coerced into accepting, made him a much reviled figure. As his biographer writes: "Ambedkar now became the most hated man in India. He was stigmatised as an uncivil, insolent, inordinately rude man, devoid of human consideration. He was represented as a devil, was cursed as a public nuisance number one and was damned as a reactionary, a stooge of the British government, a traitor to the country and a destroyer of Hinduism" (Keer 183). In 1946, Gandhi would write to Patel: "The main problem is about Ambedkar. I see a risk in coming to any sort of understanding with him, for he has told me in so many words that for him there is no distinction between truth or untruth or between violence and non-violence. He follows one single principle, viz. to adopt any means which will serve his purpose. One has to be very careful indeed when dealing with a man who would become a Christian, a Muslim or Sikh and then be reconverted according to his convenience. There is much more I could write in the same strain" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 102).

Patel too disliked Ambedkar, and had a persistent contempt for low caste politicians. To make his government more popular in the war efforts, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, invited 52 prominent Indians, including those belonging to the Scheduled Castes, and discussed steps in 1942 to enlist sympathy and cooperation of Indians. Patel, at a public meeting in Ahmedabad, taunted: "The Viceroy sent for the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, he sent for the leaders of the Muslim League, and he sent for the Ghancies (oil pressers), Mochis (cobblers), and the rest" (qtd. in Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done

to the Untouchables,” 209) In other words, the League and the Mahasabha were to be recognised as political entities, but depressed classes as the *low caste trash* they were perceived by Patel, not as political actors. And in 1948, when Ambedkar and his allies wanted to move an amendment in the Constituent Assembly for greater political rights for Dalits, Patel told them: “You have very nearly escaped partition of the country again on your lines. You have seen the result of separate electorates in Bombay, that when the greatest benefactor of your community came to Bombay to stay in bhangi quarters it was your people who tried to stone his quarters. What was it? It was again the result of this poison, and therefore I resist this only because I feel that the vast majority of the Hindu population wish you well. Without them where will you be? Therefore, secure their confidence and forget that you are a Scheduled Caste. I do not understand how Mr. Khandekar is a Scheduled Caste man. If he and I were to go outside India, nobody will find out whether he is a Scheduled Caste man or I am a Scheduled Caste man. There is no Scheduled Caste between us. So those representatives of the Scheduled Caste must know that the Scheduled Caste has to be effaced altogether from our society, and if it is to be effaced, those who have ceased to be untouchables and sit amongst us have to forget that they are untouchables or else if they carry this inferiority complex, they will not be able to serve their community. They will only be able to serve their community by feeling now that they are with us” (Parliamentary Debates).

Stripped of the verbiage, Patel was openly threatening Dr. Ambedkar, that the Dalits were being ‘given’ rights on suffrage by the savarnas, and if they wanted ‘too much’ equality they should be prepared to be set upon. It is not as far from Patel to the Hindutva violence of today as liberals seeking to appropriate Patel would therefore like to pretend.

### **The First Round of Writing History**

Eventually, after failing to work with the Congress, Ambedkar would resign. He would also try to form Scheduled Caste political organisations, along with the move to take the Scheduled Castes outside the fold of Hinduism. What I want to look at now, is, how the empowered Indian nationalism either as the state and its supporters, or as elite nationalists on the right or left, viewed Ambedkar. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. I studied History

from 1976 to 1981 as a student in one of the premier Universities of West Bengal, now recognised as one of India's outstanding state Universities. So I could draw on my own experience. It is possible to draw a sharp line. Till about the end of the 1980s, Ambedkar was ignored and/or marginalised. I will look at three notable works. Dr. Tara Chand wrote what was effectively the first official nationalist history after Independence. In his massive book, here is how Ambedkar appears. The index to volume four (a book of nearly 600 pages) tells us there are three references to Ambedkar. On page 85, we are told that nationalists rejected the Parliamentary Commission, while a few groups accepted the Commission. Ambedkar figures as one of those several groups and individuals. Page 150 has another innocuous reference. And finally on page 186 we are told "surprisingly Ambedkar too started a propaganda against the Poona Pact" (Chand, 85, 150, 186).

If this was the stance of the official (one is tempted to say "court") historian, how about the one beloved of the Right wing nationalists? Here is Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, in the third volume of his massive *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Second Revised edition. Majumdar consciously set himself against the official or court position, challenging the view that Gandhi and the Congress alone or mostly were responsible for India's freedom, as he put it clearly in his introductory remarks. But for him, this involved a bit of Hindu nationalism, a bit of Bengali identitarianism (the role of – especially Bengali – revolutionary armed struggle and that of Subhas Chandra Bose). Ambedkar, however, figures only marginally more in his narrative. Five references in the index to volume three. On page 55 he mentions Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi regarding the Khilafat movement, no doubt because it fit his own rejection of the Congress-Khilafat alliance, but we do not understand why Ambedkar is really important enough to be quoted, since Ambedkar is generally ignored (Majumdar 55). On page 303 we are told: "A new complication was added by the demand of B. R. Ambedkar that for electoral purposes the Depressed classes should be treated as a separate community. These and the other Minorities all favoured separate electorates with weightage" (Majumdar 303).

On page 388 and thereafter, we are presented with a version of the Poona Pact sharply at variance with Ambedkar's notions. For we are told that the most important part of the Award related to the Depressed Classes, for they were given a separate electorate, and



Gandhi responded by declaring a fast unto death. As a result, discussions were held. “Dr. Ambedkar, the most prominent leader of the Depressed Classes, was induced to join it, and he fully exploited the situation to his advantage” (Majumdar 388ff). Majumdar calls the reserved seats “benefits of a separate electorate”. And Ambedkar is supposed to have exploited the situation to his advantage. While the number of reserved seats was greater than the number of seats given to a separate Depressed Class electorate under the Award, Ambedkar felt that the lack of a separate electorate meant the caste Hindu political leaders would be controlling the untouchables. Clearly, for a Hindu communal author like Majumdar, the limited gains for the Dalits was already too much. The ‘legitimate’ interests of the elite nation and its exploiting elements excluded social justice and any affirmative action whatsoever. On page 574, discussing one stage of the transfer of power negotiations he writes, “Both Jinnah and Ambedkar refused to cooperate with Sapru” (Majumdar 574). Why, one wonders, is Ambedkar’s refusal brought in. If the entire narrative of hundreds of pages is so silent on the struggles of the Depressed Classes, then why drag in Babasaheb at this point? Was he a significant political factor, or was he not? Evidently, this was the problem for elite nationalism. They wanted to have their cake and eat it too – ignore Ambedkar, but mention him when it was useful to construct a discourse where he could be reviled for being an “anti-nationalist” or a collaborator of the British. Finally, on page 626, the reader is baldly informed that among the Scheduled Caste leaders, Ambedkar was an extremist (Majumdar 626).

Moving from right-wing Hindu nationalism of the Majumdar variety to left wing, Marxist tinged defenders of the nationalists, we come to Bipan Chandra and his associates in their famous book. The assumption, even among these undoubtedly leftist writers, some of whom, like Chandra and Panikkar, have a long and honourable record of fighting communalism, was that “the nationalists”, were the elite nationalist leaders, and that the separate electorate bid was simply a British ploy to divide Hindus. In other words, but for British machinations, Hindus were unified. This is what they write: “But the effort to separate the Depressed Classes from the rest of the Hindus by treating them as separate political entities was vehemently opposed by all the nationalists. Gandhiji, in Yeravada jail at the time, in particular, reacted very strongly. He saw the Award as an attack on Indian unity and

nationalism, harmful to both Hinduism and the Depressed Classes, for it provided no answers to the socially degraded position of the latter. Once the Depressed Classes were treated as a separate community, the question of abolishing untouchability would not arise, and the work of Hindu social reform in this respect would come to a halt” (Chandra et al 290). In other words – the “effort’ came only from the British. The independent thinking of elements within the Depressed Classes does not matter. And, amazingly, the fact that if so-called untouchables ceased to be Hindu and simultaneously had independent political clout is simply ignored in favour of a strategy whereby a certain number of upper caste Hindus could have the pleasure of reforming their religion and thereby uplifting the Depressed Classes. With no critical comment, they reproduce Gandhi’s views about the difference between protection of “so-called interests of the Depressed Classes in terms of seats in the legislatures or jobs,” and the “root and branch eradication of untouchability.”

In the next page, we are blandly told how political leaders of various types, including Ambedkar, became active, and how they succeeded in hammering out an agreement. Even these left-wing writers do not acknowledge that Gandhi’s real objection to separate electorate was that it would cripple Hinduism. In a manner repeated even now, Gandhi had argued that it would create a division among Hindus, as though in reality such division did not exist. Ambedkar, even at the Round Table Conference, had been quite clear that the salvation of the Depressed Classes would come only under a Swaraj government. If nonetheless he insisted on a separate electorate, that was because he, unlike Gandhi wanted the Dalits to be free of upper caste control. And it is significant that from M. M. Malaviya to G. D. Birla, diverse elite forces lined up behind Gandhi and his arm twisting of Ambedkar – not imperialism—over the separate electorate issue. This reality is erased in the narrative presented in the book being discussed. They also go on a couple of pages later, to express, without any critical comment, the nature of Gandhi’s ‘harijan’ campaign, including “internal reform of Harijans”, as though they, not the oppressors, were in need of purgation. And the basic elements of Gandhi’s reforms included giving up beef eating, giving up liquor (Chandra et al 294-295). Why demur, then, if the RSS campaigns against beef eating, if one does not criticise Gandhi for seeking to impose the same code?

## **The Changing Situation**

The death of Ambedkar and the splits in the Republican Party weakened his attempt to forge the Dalits into a fighting force. But from the end of the 1970s, this began to happen again. It started with the formation, in 1978, of the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, known as BAMCEF, an organisation of mainly Dalit public sector employees. This later led to the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party, which changed Indian politics forever by creating an independent Dalit leadership. Much has been made of the styles of functioning of the BSP leadership, etc. That is not the subject of my paper, nor am I defending the BSP. But from this point, Ambedkar began to be taken more seriously, either in hatred or in a bid to appropriate him.

Arun Shourie's book on Ambedkar complemented his book on communists. In Shourie's *Worshipping False Gods*, Ambedkar is portrayed as a self-centred, unpatriotic, power-hungry anti-national, a stooge of the British. One needs to examine Ambedkar's writings and speeches in full, instead of sloppy quotations of the type Shourie specialised in. To give two examples:

(1) Shourie says "There is not one instance, not one single, solitary instance in which Ambedkar participated in any activity connected with the struggle to free the country" (3). If we look at the "Round Table Conference, we find him saying – "When we compare our present position with the one which it was our lot to bear in Indian society of pre-British days, we find that, instead of marching on, we are marking time. Before the British we were in a loathsome position because of our untouchability. Has the British government done anything to remove it? Before the British, we could not draw water from the village well. Before the British we could not enter the temple. Can we enter now?... To none of these questions can we give an affirmative answer. Our wrongs have remained as open sores and they were not righted although 150 years of British rule have rolled away.... Of what good is such a government to anybody? (qtd. in Keer 149-150)."

(2) Shourie finds him a traitor for being in the Viceroy's council in 1942. Interestingly, while in this exalted position, Ambedkar helped militants like Achyut Patwardhan hide. The RSS, by contrast, was purely loyalist, while Shyamaprosad Mukherjee was also a provincial minister, but is not targeted by Shourie.

It is from the 1990s that a process of seeking to co-opt Ambedkar has got under way. As Dalit politics re-emerged strongly, upper caste, mainstream bourgeois parties had to try and co-opt him. Thus, while the actual political views of the RSS and the BJP may be miles away from Ambedkar, it is no longer right to publicly assume the kind of position Shourie had taken. But the RSS, in trying to appropriate Ambedkar, remained true to its own positions. Thus, RSS joint general secretary Krishna Gopal in *The Organiser*, in 2015, argued that Ambedkar thought untouchability crept in India about 1,200-1,300 years ago and linked to Islamic invasions. This has greater links with the RSS theories and not with Ambedkar, who linked it with the resurgence of Brahmanism in the Gupta age, a position just recently confirmed by gene analysis.

Mohan Bhagwat has claimed that Dr. Ambedkar, one of the major figures behind the makers of the constitution (and one who was less than satisfied with the limited democracy achieved), believed in the ideology of the Sangh and had called its workers symbols of social unity and integrity. He also said Ambedkar wanted to adopt the saffron flag of the RSS as the national flag of India. In fact, in his opinion, "A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of a society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy. It may not be necessary for a democratic society to be marked by unity, by community of purpose, by loyalty to public ends and by mutuality of sympathy. But it does unmistakably involve two things. The first is an attitude of mind, and attitude of respect and equality towards their fellows. The second is a social organisation free from rigid social barriers. Democracy is incompatible and inconsistent with isolation and exclusiveness resulting in the distinction between the privileged and the unprivileged" (Ambedkar, "Ranade, Gandhi, and Jinnah" Section VI). This is anything but the kind of politics and social order prescribed by the Sangh.

The RSS attempts at appropriating him are paralleled by Congress attempts. When nowadays Congress leaders seek to portray him as one of them, or to gloss over the differences between his and Gandhi's positions, or when official bids to transform him into a neoliberal preacher of formal equality surface, it is enough to ask why, in that case, Congress leaders and Congress sponsored nation-state rhetoric after independence sought to marginalise Ambedkar. If in course of this paper I have been able to make my readers

reconsider the relationships, I will feel that some work has been done. Where we are born is something we cannot help. Whether we simply accept the given class-caste-gender-sexuality relationships, or whether we critique that, removing the dead hand of elite nationalism and dominant and oppressive social structures, is what we can achieve.

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