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## **SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF FERTILITY CULT AND POWER IN WOMAN**

### **1. Introduction**

Various perspectives on the role of woman in the Indian society have been presented in a number of studies (e.g., Altekar 1938, 1962, Bhattacharya 1977, Brown 1974, Gatwood 1985, Kosambi 1965, Shrivastava 1979, Tyler 1973, and Wadley 1977). These studies analyzed the issues related to woman within the framework of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Most studies describe or explain the role of woman either within the ideological framework (religious ideology/beliefs, etc.) or within the socioeconomic structure of the society. However, those studies do not generally explain the exact link between the ideological framework and the role of woman in the society. Gatwood (1985:9), while discussing the impact of the ideological framework on the society, claims, "The presence or absence of a new belief, idea, or value can make or break a proposed sociocultural material change." One method of examining the relationship between the ideology and the social structure is to trace the parallel developments in the ideology and the social structure through the history. For example, in order to claim that there existed a correlation between the structure of religious beliefs and the role of/image of woman in the early Indian civilizations, it is important to trace the parallel developments in both the ideological framework and the role/image of woman in society at various points in the history. The co-existence of the two parallel system does not necessarily specify the direction of influence, but it certainly establishes the link between the two. The major thesis of this paper is that there exists a link between the interpretation of the "feminine principle" within the religious system and the role of woman in the corresponding society.

A close examination of the historical facts shows that 'fertility' is viewed as a prominent feature of the 'feminine principle' in the early traditions/civilizations in India.

This paper analyzes various interpretations of the concept of 'fertility' in the following five major ideological frameworks in early Indian traditions and civilizations:

- a. Indus valley civilization (3000 B.C.),
- b. Āryan (Vedic) civilization (1500 B.C.–Early Vedic period),
- c. Āryan (Vedic) civilization (1000–500 B.C.–Late Vedic period),
- d. Philosophical tradition of Sāmkhya (500 B.C.), and
- e. Shakti-tradition (500 A.D.).

The major claim of the discussion is that the interpretation of the feminine principle relates to the image and role of the woman in the contemporary society. The evidence to support the above hypothesis is presented from two sources: a. developments in Hindu theology specifically in connection with the goddesses who represent the ideological image of woman, and b. the role of woman in the society. In the following discussion effectiveness or the power of goddess/woman is judged by the following parameters: a. their independent existence, b. independent function, and c. their control over their function.

## **2. The Indus Valley Civilization**

Indus Valley civilization which flourished in India around (3000 B.C.) was one of the oldest civilizations in the world. The evidence gathered from the excavated cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro clearly show that this was one of the most advanced civilizations in the fields of architecture, language, metal, townplanning, irrigation etc. . Various stone seals found during the excavations present evidence for the existence of 'mother goddess' cult in this civilization. An examination of the seals points out that the feminine principle was interpreted as fertility which was viewed as the power of regeneration found in humans animals and plants. This finds expression in the mother goddess who has plants growing out of her head. At times, she is shown with trees growing out of her vulva. Explicit erotic symbolism is evident in the clay figures of females. Although some of the seals show figures of a male god with animal horns and with exposed reproductive organ, such figures are very few as compared to the female figures. Moreover, actual creation/regeneration is shown through the female figure (for further discussion see Kosambi 1965 and Tyler 1973). The mother goddess did not depend for her existence on the male

gods; she could function independently of the male god and the actual creation was ascribed uniquely to her.

The information about this civilization is quite scanty. However, on the basis of the available data, it can be claimed that the 'ideological' image of the feminine principle (mother goddess) is mirrored in the image of woman in the contemporary society. The evidence shows that both men and women had an equal access to the jobs. Gatwood (1985:27) points out, "In the case of the Harappan worker's quarters there is no clear evidence of status differentials among men and women. The relative gender equality and role changeability found later in non-Sanskritic Hindus also seems to have characterized the Indus fertility deities."

### 3. Early Vedic Civilization (1500 B.C.)

The settlement of the early Vedic civilization in India is marked by the arrival of the Āryans in 1500 B.C. This was a patrilineal society of warriors with the typical expansionistic ideology. The 'feminine principle' had fertility as a major aspect. However, its interpretation as 'creative power' is evident in two major goddesses, i.e., Aditi, the goddess of freedom and Pṛthivi, 'earth goddess.' This creative power is viewed as free; she creates and sustains the whole universe, and she exists independently of any male counterpart. The other goddesses, i.e., Uṣas 'dawn' and Vāk 'speech' and Sarasvatī 'goddess of knowledge' manifest the feminine principle as the power which creates abstract elements such as light (Uṣas - 'dawn'), speech (Vāk 'speech'), and knowledge (sarasvatī). The following descriptions in (1) of the above goddesses further clarify the point.

(1) (RV 7.87.7 "may we be free from āgas 'sin'"

Prayers for "free scope or room to live in, unimpeded by distress, disease, enemies - pollution by sins and guilt and other manifestations of evil."

(ii) Pṛthivi - Earth goddess

Mother (*Ṛgveda* 1.72.a), and goddess (*Ṛgveda* 4.51.11)  
 Holds the world in her womb (viśva-garbhā) (*Ṛgveda* 12/7.45)  
 She is the womb (yonī) *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4.1.2-9  
 She is the world bearer (lokadhāriṇī) *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 12.8  
 She is the birthplace (janayitṛī) *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.11.1.6

She is the nurse (viśvadhāya) Atharvaveda 12.1.27  
 She is the keeper (gopā) Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 8.7.72  
 She is the lady (adhipatnī) Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 8.7.72  
 of the whole creation

Those goddesses are not spouses of male gods; they do not depend on any other gods for their function, which they perform independently. They are not controlled by any male gods.

This ideological view of the feminine principle is mirrored in the image/role of woman in the contemporary society. Evidence from the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa shows that both men and women enjoyed equal marital status. Similarly, both men and women were treated as equals in the fields of education, property rights, and religious rituals. For example, both men and women would take the same marriage vows. Marriage was not obligatory for either sex, and widows were not required to remain unmarried (for further discussion see Altekar 1938 (1962) and Mittar 1913). Both boys and girls would undergo the ceremony of initiation in education. Examples of learned women are found in the Gṛhyasūtras (e.g., *Gārgī* in the *Aśvalāyana Sūtra* 3.4.4). Neither men nor women had the property rights. The property was owned by the community.

The status of men and women was the same in the context of the religious rituals. The sacrificial rituals were viewed as the processes of the recreation of the universe, in which both male and female energies were treated as equally important. Since woman represented the female energy, her presence at the sacrificial ritual was viewed as essential, (for further discussion see Altekar 1938 (1962 edition)).

#### 4. The Later Vedic Period (1000 B.C.–500 B.C.)

There is a marked difference between the early and late Vedic periods. While both the Indus and the early Vedic culture focussed on the prosperity and enrichment of life in this material world of human attachments and material possessions, the late Vedic period focused on the 'withdrawal' from it all. The development of the Vedānta philosophy changed the outlook of the people on the life. The goal of life according to Vedānta was to escape from the narrow individuality (which is symbolized by the individual attachments to the material possessions and human beings). Realization of one's identity with Brahman – the ultimate global identity was viewed as the ultimate

accomplishment in life. Brahman, the all-pervasive principle was viewed as eternal and therefore real (*satya*) while the world was viewed as temporary and therefore unreal (*mithyā*).

(Brahma satyam jagamithyā 'Brahman is the Real the world is unreal' (illusory).) Everything which encouraged worldly desires and promoted attachment to this world was viewed as 'evil,' since it would impede the spiritual progress of the 'seeker of the truth.'

In this context fertility was equated with sexuality – the height of earthly emotions which tie down human beings to this world. The feminine principle was viewed as the negative force which, it was assumed, if left loose would obstruct the path toward enlightenment. As Bhattacharya (1973:36) points out, "Thus in contrast to the relative socio-sexual freedom of women in classical Vedic times, sexuality and women in general were increasingly viewed by men as distractions from the path of enlightenment by late Vedic times."

Gatwood (1985:37) observes, "This ascetic antisexual sentiment fortified the objectification and marginalization of women and goddesses both of whom were now increasingly viewed as hedonistic creatures in need of male restraint." This view influenced the status of the *goddesses* on the one hand and the status of women on the other.

Goddesses were viewed as secondary/marginal powers. Gradually, they came to be viewed as wives of male gods. They were controlled by their spouses and they no more functioned independently of their spouses. (Since the feminine principle was the obstructing principle, it had to be controlled by their male partners).

Aditi and Pṛthivī who symbolized the free, creative feminine principle in the early Vedic period now were perceived as Viṣṇu's wives in the late Vedic period. *Uṣas* – the independent unmarried goddess is completely dropped out of the scene. Suddenly we see the pairs of Gods and goddesses such as Brahmā and Sarasvatī, Indra and Indrāṇī, Varuṇa and Varuṇāni etc. It is also interesting to note that the names of the earlier goddesses were not derivations from the names of their male counterparts. However, the "new" goddesses received the names which were derived from the names of their male spouses.

Female goddesses of the Vedas:

- (2) Aditi, Pṛthivī: spouses of Viṣṇu  
 Uṣhas → drops out  
 Indra → spouse → Indrāṇi  
 Varuṇa → spouse → Varuṇāni

“Goddess” had almost become a synonym for “spouse goddess.”

The major changes in the role of women are observed in the areas of education, marriage, and property rights. Since fertility was recognized as sexuality, woman's role in the spiritual domain was completely wiped out. As a result, a girl was not initiated into education (which essentially meant spiritual education). Her role as a mother and wife became prominent since her contribution was only to the perpetuation of the family name through giving birth to a son (who was viewed as the lamp of the family). It was only in the world of attachments (including family) in which she would play any role at all. A Hindu woman had to get married at an early age of thirteen or fourteen. The major reason for this was that she was not expected to be educated like boys who had to spend at least twelve years (from the age of twelve till twenty-four) of *brahmacarya* 'celibacy.' A woman was expected to perform the role of a mother which would give her prominence in the family. While at the age of twelve the boys would undergo the ceremony of *upanayana* 'initiation' (into the education), women would get married. Since women were not educated, they were prevented from performing vedic rituals and from participating in public meetings where the knowledge of the vedas, and other scriptures (e.g. Brāhmaṇas) was essential. In Manusmṛti (a treatise on the code of behavior) we see the references such as 'A pious Brāhmaṇa should not attend a sacrifice, which is performed by a woman' (Manusmṛti 4.205). Jaimini while arguing against allowing women to perform sacrifices, claimed 'The woman can not be compared to man. The sacrificer is learned his wife is ignorant' (Paraśara Smṛti 6-1, 24).

An interesting piece of evidence to support our hypothesis about the relationship between the ideological framework and woman's image in the society comes from the role/image of woman in the tribal/non-Hindu society which co-existed with the Hindu society during this period of time. In this society, the feminine principle was interpreted to be the mother goddess which functioned independently and was not viewed to be

controlled by any other power. In (3) the position of the Hindu woman is compared with the tribal woman's position in the society.

(3) Woman's position in the society (later Vedic period)

Hindu women	Tribal (non-Hindu) women
1. Dependent on men for maintenance	1. Not dependent on men for maintenance
2. Had to marry by parental arrangement ( <i>dhārmic</i> marriage)	2. did not have to marry by parental arrangement ( <i>Gāndharva, Asura</i> marriages)
3. prepubescence marriage	3. postpubescence marriage
4. <i>Strīdhana</i> —Parents' gift to daughter for her security	4. Bridegroom had to pay the bride's family
5. patrilineal society	5. matrilineal society
6. No freedom for divorce or remarriage, no property rights for widows	6. Freedom for divorce and remarriage; no property rights

The above points in (3) clearly show that the tribal woman was relatively more independent and had more power in the society compared to the Hindu woman. The Hindu woman had to depend on men (father before marriage and husband after marriage) for maintaining herself. This was an expected consequence of denying education to women which restricted their role only to the home. The Hindu woman during this period did not have a right to choose or divorce her partner. Since virginity of woman at the time of marriage was considered to be essential, and since marriage was obligatory for women, the women had to marry at an early age to guarantee their virginity and progeny. Since women were not financially independent, their parents would provide them with the financial security in the form of money/gold/jewelry, etc. which was called *strīdhana* 'woman's property.' This was given to women at the time of marriage. In the time of an emergency (e.g., divorce, death of husband, etc.) women could use *strīdhana*. (For further discussion see Mittar 1913.)

In contrast to this, a tribal woman was financially independent, since she had to work on the farm or in the forest (to cut the wood) to earn livelihood. She had a right to choose and divorce her partner. Moreover, since woman could choose their partners, it was not





## 5. Prakṛti 'nature': the Sāṃkhya view of the feminine principle

The Sāṃkhya school of Hindu philosophy (500 B.C.) provided yet another interpretation of the feminine principle which directly relates to the image of woman in the contemporary society. According to the Sāṃkhya philosophy, the universe is divided into two principles, i.e., *matter* (Prakṛti—the feminine principle), and the spirit (*Puruṣa*—the conscious male principle). Prakṛti was interpreted to be the material cause of the universe. It was assumed that it existed and functioned independently of the male principle, and the male could not replace it formally or functionally. Although in the early Sāṃkhya philosophy (500 B.C.) both principles were viewed as equal, later Sāṃkhya philosophy (100 A.D.), under the influence of the philosophy of Vedānta, gave prominence to Puruṣa 'the conscious male principle' and downgraded the status of Prakṛti 'the unconscious feminine principle,' which was viewed to be controlled by the male principle. Puruṣa was equated with Ātman (the omniscient essence of the universe) and Prakṛti was equated with *Māyā* 'the world of matter' – which was viewed as transitory and therefore unreal. It was argued that Puruṣa 'the conscious male' is attracted by the Prakṛti who lures him to the material world of transitory pleasures. The goal of Puruṣa was interpreted to be the release from the clutches of Prakṛti 'the unconscious feminine principle.'

This interpretation of the feminine principle fits remarkably with the image of woman in the corresponding society. As a mother, she played the role of the Prakṛti – the cause of the creation of the children. She was given a valued position in the family. However, it was assumed that she could function properly only under the guidance of the Puruṣa the male member in the family. The word '*Puruṣa*' etymologically means 'man.' The dominance of Puruṣa was observed at both the ideological/philosophical as well as societal level. Moreover, the increasing influence of asceticism is seen in the treatment of women. Women, similar to Prakṛti were viewed as an impediment in the path of enlightenment or *mokṣa* which was interpreted as liberation of Puruṣa from Prakṛti 'the world of attachments.' Woman's role was limited to home – the world of attachment. It was argued that a true seeker of enlightenment must transcend the world of attachment. By the 1st century A.D., the right to seek enlightenment by renouncing the world of attachments was totally restricted to men. Women were denied enlightenment. Their role was restricted to home. Woman was the 'creator,' and 'ruler' in the house. Like Prakṛti, she would

function under the guidance of Puruṣa who must leave her in order to achieve enlightenment.

## 6. Shakti 'power': the abstract feminine principle

'Shakti' is another interpretation of the feminine principle in Hinduism. The word Shakti literally means 'power.' Shakti is a common noun in Sanskrit. However, when used as a proper noun, it refers to the feminine principle. The discussion in the preceding sections shows that in the ideological framework of the mainstream Hinduism (specifically in the philosophical doctrines of Vedānta and Sāṃkhya) the feminine principle was gradually being subordinated to the male principle, and that woman's role in the corresponding society was gradually losing power.

A new ideology found its way in the mainstream Hinduism in the 7th century A.D. This ideology had a non-Hindu/tribal origin and is labelled with a blanket term *Tāntrism*. A careful analysis of the history of Tāntrism shows that there were various sources/sects of Tāntrism which gradually merged into one another and found their way into mainstream Hinduism around 7th century A.D. (For further discussion on the origin and development of Tāntrism see Bharati 1965.)

The major point of interest for the present discussion is that within this tradition, the feminine principle was equated with the 'power' of creation, sustenance, and destruction. Whether or not this interpretation of the feminine principle was merely an extension of the mother goddess of the Indus Valley culture is a matter of controversy.

Historical evidence shows that Tāntrism was a well developed system of philosophy in the tribes of the north eastern India by the 5th century A.D. By the 7th century A.D. it became part of the vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects of the mainstream Hinduism related to the two major gods, i.e., Viṣṇu and Shiva respectively. At the same time, the system of Tāntrism remained very much part of the system of beliefs of the tribals. Within the mainstream Hinduism, *Shakti* 'power' was equated with the female spouse of the male gods. Goddesses who were earlier viewed as spouses of the male gods were now interpreted as the 'powers' of the male gods. For example, Lakṣmī who was viewed as Viṣṇu's wife was now interpreted as his power of sustenance. New goddesses were created to symbolize various powers of male gods. Thus Pārvatī, Umā, and Kālī were viewed as personifications of Shiva's Shaktis or powers of creation, sustenance

and destruction respectively. 108 Shaktis 'powers' of Shiva's are viewed as Shiva's wives in *Matsyapurāṇa*.

In contrast to this, in the tribal culture, this 'spousification' of Shakti 'power' did not take place. Instead, the feminine principle was considered to be *the god*. In Tāntric sects of the tribal origin, Shakti 'power' was viewed as independent of any male god or partner. Bharati (1965) points out—'Shakti represents the fusion of energy and matter, or idea and manifestation.'

The following quote in (6) describes Shakti 'power.' It is very clear from the description that this feminine principle is beyond 'male' or 'female' symbols. It is interpreted as power-physical, mental, and spiritual. Shakti is viewed as the fusion of male and female polarities.

(6) Shakti as the ultimate power:

That Power who is defined as Consciousness in all beings, reverence to Her, reverence to Her, reverence to Her, reverence, reverence.

That Power who is known as Reason in all beings, reverence to Her, reverence to Her, reverence to Her, reverence, reverence.

That Power who exists in all beings as Shadow, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings as Energy, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings in the form of Species, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings as Peace, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings as Loveliness, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings as Compassion, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings in the form of Illusion, reverence to Her (etc.).

That Power who exists in all beings as Mother, reverence to Her (etc.).

(Mookherjee and Khanna 1977:181-183)

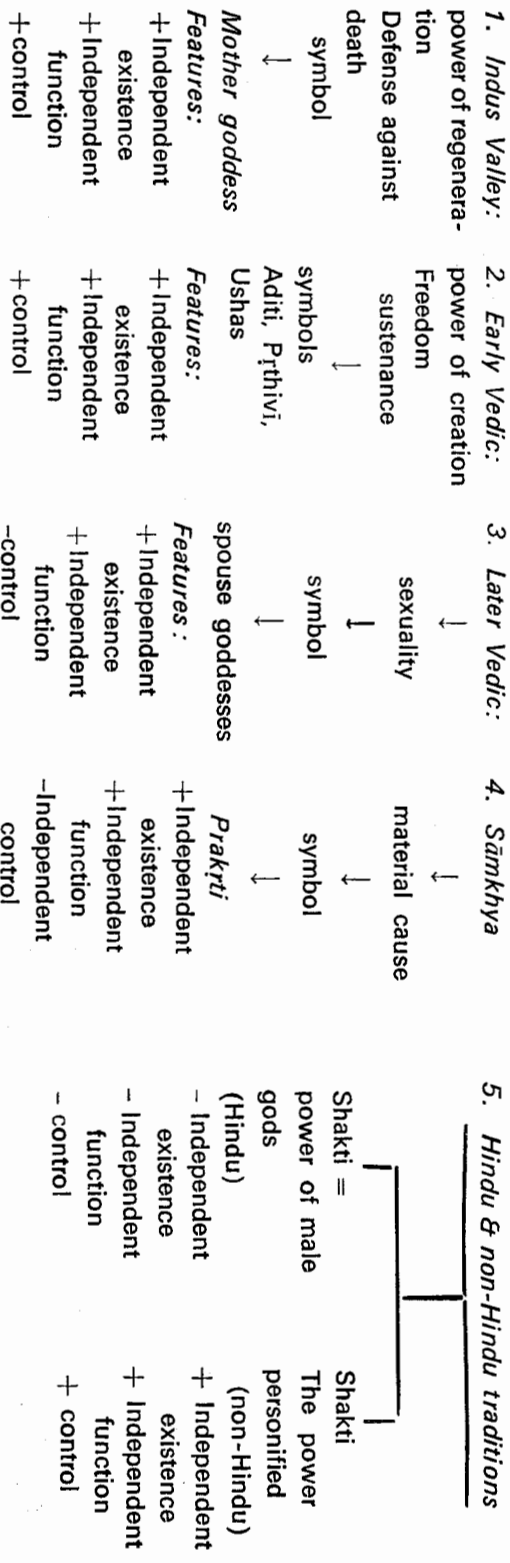
The image of woman in the above two (Hindu and the tribal) societies shows a distinct contrast. In the mainstream Hinduism woman was subordinated to males and did not have any role besides the one in the family. Moreover, she was viewed as an obstacle in the path of enlightenment. In contrast to this, in the tribal society men and women enjoyed freedom of choice of their partners and women were treated as equals. Sexuality was not downgraded in this system, rather, as Bharati (1965:243) points out, in this culture 'sexual enjoyment is established as an excellent matter. If it is necessary for every living being; if it is a natural act, then its performance is a natural worship, that is to say, it is the worship of the world-mother.'

Thus in the Tāntrism while the feminine principle is viewed as devoid of male-female polarity, sexuality is not perceived as negative due to the fact that the Shakti is expressed in the mother symbol, which signifies Creation.

## 7. Conclusion

The discussion in the preceding sections shows that there exists a correlation between the interpretation of the feminine principle in various ideological frameworks in different traditions and the image/role of woman in the corresponding society. (7) and (8) summarize the implications of the observations in the discussion. (7) Presents the interpretations of the concept of 'fertility' in five ideological frameworks of diverse traditions. Each section includes (a) the interpretation of 'fertility', (b) the symbol of the feminine principle, (c) and the features of the feminine principle. Presence/absence of the three major features, i.e., independent existence, independent function, and control over their own function, is identified by the (+) or (-) signs. (+) indicates the presence while (-) indicates the absence of the feature.

## 7. FERTILITY



(8) illustrates the correspondence of the image of the feminine principle in the ideological framework (left column) and the image of woman in the corresponding society (right column). The observation of (8) shows that if the above three features are viewed as the parameters of judging the power, then it can be concluded that, the more powerful the feminine principle was viewed, the larger (and more powerful) role the women played in the corresponding society. Thus while in (8.1) where the feminine principle was viewed as most powerful (i.e., + independent existence, + independent function, + control), women enjoyed more power/played a larger role in the society. (2-a) and (2-b) point out that the lower the feminine principle on the power hierarchy the more restricted the role of woman in the society. Finally in (8.3) it is clear, that when the feminine principle is viewed as powerless, the woman role shows a complete subordination to male dominance.

(8) Feminine Principle - Woman's role in the society

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. + Independent existence<br>+ Independent function<br>+ control<br>(Indus Valley, Vedic, tribal<br>(non-Hindu) civilizations) | 1. <i>Larger role in the society</i><br>+ Education<br>+ choice to marry/remarry<br><i>Mother, Educator, commu-<br/>nity work</i> |
| 2a. + Independent existence<br>- Independent function<br>- control<br>(spouse goddess)  | 2a. <i>Restricted role</i><br>- Education<br>- choice to marry/remarry<br><i>wife</i>   |
| 2b. + Independent existence<br>+ Independent function<br>- control (Prakṛti)  | 2b. <i>Wife (same as above)</i>   |
| 3. - Independent existence<br>- Independent function<br>- control<br>(Shakti in Hindu tradition)                                | 3. <i>Complete subordination<br/>to male dominance</i>  |

The discussion in this paper raises the following questions:

Do these two, i.e., the ideological framework and the social structure always function in consonance with each other? Which of the two exercises more influence on the other? Can we determine the factors (i.e., socioeconomic, religious, etc.) independently of any particular culture, which influence the direction of change from

sociological structure to the ideological framework and vice versa or is it purely a culture-specific phenomenon? Do some societies change their ideological framework much more readily than their social structure?

A great deal of empirical research needs to be done before those questions are satisfactorily answered.

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