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Status of Tribal Women in North East India

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Tribal Identity of North East

Tribals are popularly known as a symbol of self-assertion, comprise of around 8.2 per cent of the national population. The tribals are concentrated mostly in the central belt of India and parts of the North-East.

From the very beginning, Assam has been a land of heterogeneous racial strains and cultures of both hills and plains people. The land is considered by the anthropologists and sociologists as a paradise for its colourful variety of castes and tribal people.¹ In fact Assam is a museum of a large number of human species ever found on earth. Assam is situated in 'one of the great migration routes of mankind'.² Since time immemorial people of different ethnic groups from various parts of the world while migrating through this land at different periods and different routes left their off springs in both hills and plains of this regions. In course of time Assam has become a melting pot where races as diverse as the Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tibetan, Mongolian, Negroid, Aryans etc. drawn from diverse hives at different points of time were blended and shaped into the vivid Assamese people. No wonder, such perfect fusion of culture and heritage of her numerous races, tribes and sub tribes gave birth to Assamese Culture __ a rich tapestry women with multicoloured yarns of distinct heritage, traditions, lifestyles, faiths and beliefs.

Earlier the name of Assam represented a vast area of whole north east India, which now redesigned into seven states of Indian federation known as Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The whole region of North east is basically the land of tribal people living since time immemorial. Even after the division a large number of tribal people are still inhabiting in Assam. These tribes drifted to this region at different intervals of time and settled in various provinces of this land several hundred years ago. It is very difficult at the present juncture to make presumptions about the foremost settlers of this region. But one thing is clear that the successive immigrants had merged up with the early settlers. The different tribes were discernible from each other by their socio cultural traditions and dialects, which varied from each other. Not only this, these tribes were secluded from each other for several hundred years due to the lack of interaction among them. But one affinity has been found among the tribal people of north east India is that they belong to the similar bigger

¹ Sen, Sipra, Tribes and castes of Assam, P-25.

² Mills. J. h, Assam Review, March, 1928, P-24.

ethnic group popularly known as 'Indo-Mongoloids'.³ Even this 'Indo-Mongoloids' are mentioned by the Vedic Aryans as the 'Kiratas'⁴ proving the existence of this ethnic group people in the region even during the Vedic age.

The Mongoloids are characterized by yellow or yellow- brown skin colour and black stretched or flat wavy and coarse head hair, their eyes are black or dark- brown in colour. The eye-slit is oblique. One of the typical characteristics of the Mongoloids is the presence of Mongolian fold in their eyes. Their face is broad and zygomatic arches are very prominent. Another important feature is scanty growth of facial and body hairs.

It is very important to note that the non tribal people of the north east India are mostly of Caucasoid origin who also migrated to this region long past. Therefore it can be said that the elements of socio cultural aspects of north east India have been developed with the process of assimilation of the Mongoloids and the Caucasians by means of matrimonial relations.⁵ again in certain areas the intermingling between the two mighty groups had taken place to such an extent that it was very difficult to distinguish one from another.

It is a very popular fact that the Indo-Mongoloid tribes of north east India were originally the settlers of North west China near the Hwang-Hu and the Yangtse Kiang rivers, wherefrom they migrated southward and somewhere in north Burma the group become diversified. One group migrated westward alongwith sub-Himalayan ranges. Another group entered the Brahmaputra Valley by the north eastern route, while one more group moved southwards to reach as far as South east Asia.⁶

From linguistic point of view, the Indo-Mongoloids of north east India belong to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family.⁷ This family has been divided into two broad branches_ Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese. One of the sub divisions of the Siamese-Chinese branch is Thai. The people like Ahom, Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton, Phakial, Turung etc. living in different parts of northeast India speak languages belong to this Thai subdivision. Except the Khasi and the Pnar, the other Indo-Mongoloids of northeast India speak language of Tibeto-Burman branch. Again the Tibeto-Burman language group is sub divided into two branches in north Assam and in Assamese-Burmese branch. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and some tribes of Assam speak the languages of north Assam branch. Among them the names like Adi, Aka, Mishing, Nishi, Safala, Mishimi, Miri and Abar are the prominent. The Assam-Burmese branch another sub division of the group has been re divided into many groups and sub-groups. They are the i) the

³ Encyclopedia Britenica, Vol-2, 1977, P-208.

⁴ Das, B.M, Some aspects of Physical Anthropology of the Tribes of Northeast India,, pp-43,44.

⁵ Ibid, p-44

⁶ Ibid, P-47.

⁷ Garison, G.A, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-1, Part-I, P-41.

Naga dialects like Ao, Angami, Sema, Tankhul, Sangtam, Konyak,Lotha, Mao and Kabui etc; ii) the Bodo dialects like Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Tipra and a few more, iii) the Kuki Chin speeches of Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram, the most important of which is Meitei which is quite a developed literary speech in Manipur. Apart from the other tribes of the region, Khasis with their sub-groups speak dialect of the Mon-Khmer linguistic group of the Austro Asiatic language family. This group of people is mainly residing in the state of Meghalaya as their homeland.

In course of time, the Indo-Mongoloid tribes of northeast India has been broadly grouped into six categories on the basis of few aspects like linguistic affinities, cultural parity, biological variations and geographical settings. These groups are i. Arunachal Tribes, ii. Nagas, iii. Bodos, iv. Lushai Kukis, v. Khasis and vi. Others. All these various groups of indigenous tribes are presently scattered in the entire north eastern region. A large number of Mongolian people got refuge in Arunachal Pradesh. The major tribal communities are the Monpas, Sherdunkpes, Akas, Khowas, Mijis, Bangnis and Sulungs of Tawang. Adis, Membas, Khambas, Bangros, chakmas, Deoris, Khamtis, Khamiyangs, Mlshimis, Noctes, Singphos, Tangsas and Wanchos etc. of East and West Kameng district. Each of these tribes have their own distinctive culture, customs, language and traditions. The cultural similitude is found among the Mishings of Assam plains and the Adi tribes of Arunachal, whereas some of the customs of Naga tribes are found among the Neoctes and the Wanchos.⁸

Broadly the term 'Naga' is a generic name for the group of tribes occupying the land of Nagaland, northern Manipur and bordering districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Of the main Naga tribes, mention may be made of Angami, Sema, Rengma,, Ao, Lotha, Chang, Konyak, Chekasen, Khiannagan, Phom, Sangtam, Yinchungree, Zeliang, Puchey and Labui. A large number of cultural and dialectical disparities among the various Naga groups and sub groups are found. These dissimilarities can be seen in their physical features, culture and dialects.⁹ These differences are perhaps due to the geographical conditions of the territory, prolonging inbreeding and lack of intermixture within the Naga group of tribes. Many sub tribes of Nagas have marked affinities with the Bodo tribes.¹⁰

The major tribe of the Brahmaputra Valley of present Assam is the 'Bodo' tribe. The Bodos at one time had formed a solid block of a Mongoloid people and ruled over a part of Brahmaputra Valley and spread over a vast area in west upto North Bengal and in south they occupied Cachar, Sylhet and Mymensingh districts.¹¹ Actually the word 'Bodo' symbolizes a lingo, but

⁸ Jaiswal, i.j.s, Tribes of northeast India: Ethnic and Population aspects, in the Tribes of North East India, edited by S. Karotemprel, PP- 28-29.

⁹ Ibid, pp- 85

¹⁰ Choudhury, P.C, The History of Civilization of the people of Assam till twelfth Century, pp-91-92.

¹¹ Kar, R.K, The Tribes of North India: An Overview' in tribes of North East India, edited by Sarthak Sengupta, p-6.

usually it is used to represent a broad ethnic group. The important members of the Bodo groups are Kachari, Koch, Mech, Rabha, Chutia, Lalung, Tiwa, Moran, Hajong etc. apart from the Bodos themselves. The Garos of Meghalaya, Tripurians of Tripura and Dimasas of North Cacharhills also speak Bodo language. Before the arrival of the Ahoms in the Brahmaputra Valley, Bodos used to rule the greater portion of the region in the form of kingdoms like those of the Kacharies and the Chutias. Besides, the Boro group of tribes, the other major tribal inhabitant of Assam is Mishings, Deoris and the Karbi tribes, who had settled in the Mikir hills, which is currently known as the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. According to some scholars, the Karbi language has some similarities with certain Naga dialects on the one hand and Lushai-Kuki dialects on the other.¹² In fact the Lushai-Kuki tribes are closer to Chittagong and Burma occupied south Manipur and Mizoram.¹³

The major tribes of Mizoram are the Mizos. Besides them some other smaller tribes like Baite, Chakma, Hmar, Lusei, Mara, Pang, Pnar, Riang, Tlau, Bwan, Gorkha, Hualngo, Magh, Paite, Pawi, Lakhar, Thado-Kuki, Ralte etc are also the inhabitants of Mizoram. The Meithei of Manipur Valley is dominating people of Manipur who shows intermediate characteristic between the Naga and the Lushai-Kuki.¹⁴ The most numerically dominant original inhabitants of Tripura are the Tripuris, Riang, Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Chakma, Mag and Uchai. The homeland of Khasi, Garo and Pnar is Meghalaya. It is also important to note that Khasi society is matrilineal in nature, which indicates that the position and prestige of women were exceptionally high in that society.

To know the status of women in different tribal societies in Ancient and Medieval Assam, one has to go back to the remote past. But unfortunately the history and pre-history of the different tribal societies available are not so older. The beginning of the tribes, mostly the hill tribes, are not so civilized to keep historical records. Consequently they were not able to inherit their own history. Even they were accustomed to live isolated life and hence they remained unaware of the region other than their own inhabitant, and had a spectacular, ingenious style of livelihood.

In real fact that, the various Indo-Mongoloid tribes of the present North East region used to stay under one common territory known as Kamarupa or Assam in Ancient and Medieval period. It is already mentioned that the earlier physiography of Assam had changed and most of the major tribal populated areas like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh has already been isolated themselves from Assam to get the status of independent states. In these states almost one third people are tribal, from a common region and common ethnic

¹² Das, B.M, Aspects of Physical Anthropology' in the Tribes of North East India, edited by S. Karotemprel, P-51.

¹³ Choudhury, P.C, The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., P-87.

¹⁴ Jaswal, I.J.S, Tribes of North East India: Ethnic and Population Aspects, in the tribes of North East India, edited by S. Karotemprel, P-29.

identity. Each of them has their common distinctive culture, customs, language and traditions of their own. Yet some affinity and assimilation of culture have been observed among many of them. On socio-cultural aspect, tribe endogamy and clan exogamy, bride price are the common principles of marriage. The religious beliefs and practices are especially of the respective tribes. The societies of the people are governed by some traditional unwritten and non-codified customary laws, which are executed by the village councils. Agriculture with Jhum method of cultivation is the traditional means of livelihood for most of the tribes.

Regarding the status of women, it can be said that unlike the conservative Hindu society, women folk of tribal societies were given many privileges. They were given liberty in different spheres of life. Women were independent to take part in all the social, religious and cultural functions. The society sanctioned them to move without restraints within and outside the village. They could profusely mix with the boys and select their life partners without any social obstacles. In spite of all these privileges, they have not been given equal rights in the social, political, judicial as well as economic fields. After sharing almost equivalent responsibly in day to day activities right from child rearing, household duties to agricultural activities, the practical utility and gravity of labour they put and share are equally not appreciated. But before we go into the detail about the position of women in the tribal society, it would be appropriate to know the social structure of different tribal societies.

Social and Family Structure

The social organization of some of the tribes are found to be patriarchal and some of them are matriarchal and a few are both patriarchal and matriarchal. All the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Assam except Lalungs and Dimasas follow the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal structure of society. The Hill Lalungs of Assam, Garo and Khasis of Meghalaya follow the matriarchal structure of society, whereas the Dimasas follow both patriarchal and matriarchal form of society.

If the social structure of the patriarchal tribal societies are observed it is found that in these societies, descent is recognized through male line. Generally father is regarded as the guardian of the family. In the absence of the father the elder son, if adult, shoulder the responsibilities and take full charge of the family. The mother is the mistress of the house next to the father and is much respected. The smallest unit of the society is the family consisting of father, mother and their children. Both joint family and nuclear family are prevalent in the different communities of tribal society. In the joint family system, the wife joins her husband after marriage and the latter generally lives with his own parents and brothers. Most of the tribes have a traditional custom that the sons set up their independent residence after marriage and

that is why the sons constructs a house of his own before marriage and after marriage the bride goes straight to her husband's house, and not to her father-in-laws house.

Among some tribes like Adis, Noetes, Wanchos etc. of Arunachal Pradesh married girls live with their parents in a joint family till the birth of the first child. After child birth they construct their own house with the help of parents and other members of their family. Due to the unitary family system, the boy and the girl marry when they mature to arrange for their own livelihood and handle their own family. When a joint family breaks up, custom demands that either the youngest or the eldest son continues living in the parental house to support the family and his old parents. All members of a joint family live in the same household, take their meals from the common hearth, perform rituals and ceremonies together and the expenses are met from the wealth earned acquired by common efforts. The authority of all movable and immovable property lies with the father, which is inherited by the eldest or youngest son, are by all sons equally after his death. The daughters have no claim over family property, but they share the property of their mother like cloths, ornaments and utensils etc.. whereas the customs and the social and family organizations of the matriarchal societies of Lalungs of Assam and Garo and Khasis of Meghalaya are quite different from the patriarchal societies of north east India.

In the matrilineal societies of the Hill Lalungs, Garo and Khasi tribes, the descent is counted through female line and it is women who inherit the immovable parental property like house and lands. The children take the clan name of the mother. In these societies, the son after marriage leaves his parental house and settles either in the wife's village or in her house. Generally one of the daughters, either elder or younger is given the major share and made the inheritress of the property who used to stay with her old parents after her marriage. In the Khasi and Jaintia society the youngest daughter is made the custodian of the family property. The other daughters are also given the share of maternal property to set up their independent house in the parent's village. Therefore the matriarchal society of household consists of a mother, a father and a daughter and resident son-in-law, who is known as **Gobhia** in Lalung society and **Nokram** in Garo society.

Another tribe, which is neither fully patriarchal nor matriarchal is the Dimasa tribe of Assam. The Dimasa society has its uniqueness and peculiarities in its clan system. The Dimasa system of descent is rather unique in this part of India as no other tribe inhabiting the area has double descent.¹⁵ They follow both patriclan (Sengfong) and matriclan (Julu) system of descent. Every man or woman of Dimasa tribe bears allegiance to two clans. A man primarily recons his descent from his paternal grandfather and inherits his secondary affiliation from his maternal grandmother and then from paternal grandmother. But her secondary affiliation changes when

¹⁵ Danda, Dipali G, Among the Dimasa of Assam, p-51.

she gets married. She is transferred to her husband's proclaim by observing a ceremony called Madai Khilimba, but her primary affiliation of matrilineage however remained unchanged.

As the Dimasa has double clan system, so the daughters and never daughter-in-laws inherit the properties of mother and sons inherit the properties of father. But there are no such restrictions that forbid the daughters to inherit the properties of parents. In the absence of sons, the properties of father are inherited by daughters. Since the Dimasa custom does not permit women of different matrilineages to live in the same house, therefore, after marriage a boy has to leave his father's house and has to set up a new family life after marriage. So a Dimasa family is of nuclear type consisting of father, mother and their unmarried children.¹⁶ In this way they have very unique system of family life.

Social Status of Tribal Women

The status of women can be identified by the role and responsibilities played by them in the society. This performance of role and responsibilities may be through different ways and different stages of her life. She contributes her role in the family from her childhood to womanhood as a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law and as a widow. In every stage of her life there are different responsibilities that a woman has to shoulder in a family or a society. Therefore her rights, obligations and duties, authorities and control give her status in her family and in her society by virtue of her rights and duties. Thus, the status and role of women in a family and in a society is governed by their own social norms, values, customs, attitudes and social behaviour etc. as in every society a woman's roles and her rights, duties and obligations are related to man. In the same way, the different tribal societies of north east India have their own tribal norms and customs according to which women have been given various roles and accordingly her status is determined. In fact, the status of the women usually centers on her family and society.

Position of Girl Child

The position of a girl child depends upon the descent and inheritance system of the tribes she belongs to. Among the male dominated and patriarchal society, though the daughter is not neglected and brought up with same affection and love, but son is more preferred because daughter is considered as a transient member of the family as they leave their place of orientation after marriage, whereas son is regarded as the preserve of the family lineage and support for his parents in their older age. But if the parents do not have a son then the tradition

¹⁶ Nunisa Motilal, Status of Women in Tribal Societies, P-82.

has the provision that the youngest daughter can stay at her parent's house along with her husband.¹⁷

At the matriarchal society of the Garo, Khasi and Lalung societies, where the descent is traced through female line, birth of a female child is preferred rather than a male one to continue the family and clan. Inheritance of property also goes to the female. A female child in a Garo family ensures the continuity of the family tree and saves such a family or clan from being looked down by others as an extinct one.¹⁸ The girl child is also preferred, as she also becomes the support for the parents in their old age. In the Khasi and Garo societies, the boy is the temporary member of the family, since after marriage he leaves his parental house and goes to stay with his wife either in her house if she is inheritress of her maternal property or makes her new residence in the village of her wife.

But the custom is quite different in the matriarchal society of the Jaintias, where the husband after marriage remains member of his own mother's house and does not go to live in his mother-in-law's house, he only comes to visit his wife whenever feel necessity. 'The husband comes to his mother-in-law's house only after dusk and that he does not eat, smoke or even partake of betel nut there, the idea being that none of his earnings go to support this house and therefore, it is not etiquette for him to partake of food or other refreshments there.¹⁹ But his children will be member of his wife's family. However it is clear from the fact that in the matrilineal social system, the girl has more importance in social position in comparison to the position of boy.

A girl child either of the tribal families, be it patriarchal or matriarchal, is no way neglected because she is considered as an economic assets for her parents. She not only serves the family in the home but also constitutes the major toil in cultivation, which is the primary resource of subsistence in the tribal society. Besides, parents of the girls get a substantial amount as bride price during her marriage in most of the patriarchal tribal societies. It is generally seen that a girl from the age of ten onward usually helps her mother in the house holds and in agricultural works. Since mother is found to be so busy in the day-to-day domestic as well as agricultural activities, therefore the grown up female child takes the responsibilities of the minor children. Even in the present days, the female child in the hill societies is seen to be carrying her younger brother or sister on her back with the help of a piece of cloth. Hence it is found that in the tribal family, the girl from her childhood begins her contribution of works whereas a boy child is not pressurized by the parents to share the responsibilities of the family affairs until he

¹⁷ Nath, Jogendra, Cultural Heritage of Tribal Societies, Vol-I, P-46.

¹⁸ Gassah, L.S, Status of women in Jaintia Culture, Women in Meghalaya, Ed. Soumen Sen, P-23.

¹⁹ Gurdon, P.R.T, The Khasis, pp-76-79.

becomes matured. Hence the girl child is always considered as a valuable asset for the parents and after her marriage for her husband.

Division of Works in Tribal Societies

The tribal families has a clear cut division of household duties, home management and family affairs. The division is made as per sex composition of the family. The burden of domestic chores within the household right from food gathering to cooking from early morning till late evening apart from helping the male folk in the agricultural works has to be abided by women. The man fold is assigned to do some hard work like cutting trees in the Jhum plots, cleaning jungle, hunting, fishing etc. which are not possible on the part of female. The entire maintenance and earning of livelihood of a family depend upon the man. The latter very seldom helps women in household chores. But in times of need like when women fall ill or go out of the village, men are out of the household.

Tribal women play the major rule in the daily life then the man folk. If a comparison is made on the daily activities of women of the tribal societies and non-tribal societies, it is found that the former is much more hard worker than the latter. Their works includes a vast area. Apart from doing the day-to-day household activities, they go to the cultivating fields and help their men folk in agricultural activities. Hence, they do more works than their male counterparts also and get exposed to a good amount of strain in terms of physical works. If someone calculates the whole period of working hours, then it appears that the female force is far away than the male force. This will bring to a conclusion that the female force is the potential pillar and asset for their families, who not only gives birth and nurture the future generation, but also drifts the society towards progress with their sincerity and commitment to both in house and in out field works.

Apart from this, it is seen that their busy routine begins at the crack of dawn and ends at late hours of the night. Their daily activities begin with husking and pounding of rice and millet, cleaning of cattle shed, milking the cows, rearing and feeding the domestic birds and animals, cleaning of house, washing of cloths and utensil, fetching of water from water source, bringing of fire woods, cooking at morning and afternoon food for the entire family, preparing of rice bear. After cooking, she feeds the breakfast to men and children. After finishing the domestic works, they packed the mid day lunch and tubes of bears for their own and their male partners and hasten to the fields. In the agricultural field right from sowing to harvesting, women do the entire work. While returning back to home from agricultural field in the evening they collect basketful of vegetables, paddy and fuel from the forest. On reaching home they feed the domestic animals, fetch water and prepare the evening meal, bear and serve the family members. Apart from doing the normal daily domestic activities, women also entertain the

guest by making special food and wine. In the busy schedule of their day-to-day routine, they do not forget the role of mother. They take special care of the health and education of their infants and children. They spent their leisure time in spinning and weaving. It is apparent from the preceding deliberations that women of the tribal societies, work relentlessly without taking any rest. They neither neglects the domestic activities nor the agricultural works because both the works are important for them. Therefore tribal women are regarded as precious assets by their families for their valuable contributions.

In spite of doing the major part of work of the family, women are not given rights and respect in same proportion by the society. Dominant and prestigious position in the society is occupied by men. Women are not entitled to play the authoritative role in her family. Her consultation is taken regarding the family affairs, but the final judgment is vested with men. Even matter of family economy or any other serious matters, the male members of the family do not think the suggestion of women. But the things are changing fast. With the spread of education and employment opportunities among women of the tribal societies, the status of women has improved. The attitude of the hills society towards the working women is changing. In the previous days, women were regarded as house wife and helpers for their husbands in the agriculture, but their works were not provided any economic value. Therefore they were dependent on man. But in the present days the women also occupying the salaried jobs, therefore they directly supported the family economy.

Educational Status

The scenario of educational arena is also amidst the darkness among the tribal women of north east. As most of the time they remain busy with their household activities, they get very few time to go to school. Even the remote villages where the tribal people live are far away from the reach of educational institutions. But now gradually scene is being changed due to the efforts taken by the government of independent India. Now the message of women empowerment and gender equality has really bringing the rays of renaissance among the tribal women of north east.

Political Status

Political participation of tribal women had been very negligible since time immemorial. Even during the first fifty year of Independent India we find the political participation in rear cases. But the scenario is being changes. Now along with the consciousness through rise of education, the tribal women are coming out to occupy the political dominion of the Country. The beginning started with the emergence of reservation in the Panchayat raj which is the grass root level of political institution of a Country and we hope that in near future the entire picture will change when tribal women of the Country will enjoy equal share in political fields also.

Conclusion

Thus it is seen that the status of tribal women can be judged mainly by the roles they play in society. Their roles are determined to a large extent through the system of descent. The families try to pass their property by the line of descent. The family surnames too are traced on the basis of the system of descent. In an unilineal system the descent is traced either through the male or female line. When the descent is traced through the mother's line, it is called a matrilinear system and when it is traced through the father's line, it is called a patrilinear system. Most of the tribes in India follow a patrilinear system. There are exceptional cases like the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo and Lalung of Meghalaya in the North-East who follow the matrilinear system. There are very rare cases of bilinear descent.

The status of a person quite often depends on the system of authority he/she enjoys in the community. When the authority is held through the male line, it is called 'patriarchy' and when it is held through the female line, it is called 'matriarchy'. Quite frequently one mixes up 'descent' with 'authority'. Not surprisingly, the Khasis are often believed to follow matriarchy. But in reality though the property is inherited through the mother's line, the final authority of the household vests with the mother's brother. But the status of women are gradually being changed with the lights of modernism.

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