

From Bharata to the Cinema: A Study in Unity and Continuity

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Bharata Natya Shastra, regarded in antiquity as a sacred text and called the Fifth Veda,¹ was written by Bharata, India's greatest writer on the arts. The book, which covers music, dance, and criticism, was, and still is, the most important work on Indian Aesthetics. Its influence is evident in contemporary Indian dance, music and drama, whether religious or secular; its precepts and practices are persistently followed in these art forms, including the cinema, in modern India. The date and authorship of the *Bharata Natya Shastra* are both in dispute. The book has been variously dated from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D., but there is even less certainty about the author. "Bharata" originally meant a dancer-actor so that the title could mean simply "A Shastra² on Drama for the Dancer-Actor." On the other hand, "Bharata" is also a name, and so it is possible that the title means "A Shastra on Drama by Bharata." However, for practical purposes, whatever his real name might have been, the sage of the *Natya Shastra* is called Bharata.

One of the problems that confronts the scholar of ancient India is the vexed question of dates. History, as we know it, is a Greek invention. However, that the "Hindus had no sense of history," is too facile a statement. A people who believed that a man's sojourn on earth is only a momentary step-over leading to another existence can be forgiven for not taking dates too seriously. Also, there was the concept of *maya*, illusion, and the belief that we were all part of a divine drama or *lila*. It is, therefore, a pity that no one can place in time — with any degree of exactitude — the earliest musicologists of India.³

The first of these was Narada who undertook the task of finding a relationship between sacred and secular music. He also discovered the features common to folk art and music. Tradition has it that Narada was a sage, a *muni*, who after accomplishing his work on earth, left for the Elysian fields where he still plays his lute. To further complicate matters, later theorists took the cognomen "Narada," so that we now have four books by different Naradas. Research has, nevertheless, proved that the first Narada was the author of *Sikṣā* ("learning" or "training"). This was the first work in India that examined music in a spirit of scientific enquiry.

European Sanskritists knew of the existence of *Bharata Natya Shastra* from references to it in various source material but believed that all manuscripts had been lost or destroyed. It was only in the latter half of the last century that, while working on a medieval work on drama, Fitzedward Hall came across the manuscript of the *Natya Shastra*. Others were then discovered and much spade work was done by the German scholar M. W. Heyman, and by the French scholars Paul Regnaud, Joanny Grosset, and Sylvain Lévi. In 1894, Pandits Shivadatta and Kashinath Pandurang Parab published the original Sanskrit text and in 1950 Manomohan Ghosh made the first translation into English. Ghosh's treatment and translation of the *Natya Shastra* is a major work of scholarship and original research.

When Bharata was asked to explain the origins of his book, he replied that when the people of the world strayed from a righteous path "their happiness was mixed with sorrow" (3). The gods then asked Brahma, the Great Father, to devise a new *veda* which could be seen as well as heard and which would belong to all the people. Brahma, therefore, agreed to create the Fifth Veda which would induce "duty, wealth, as well as fame, and contain good counsel . . .," which would be "enriched by the teaching of all scriptures and give a review of all arts and crafts" (3). So Brahma took recitation from the *Rig-veda*, song from the *Sam-veda*, histrionic representation from the *Yajur-veda*, and sentiments from *Atharva-veda*, and with a combination of these created the new *veda*. Brahma then asked the god Indra to teach it to the other gods, but Indra said the gods would neither understand nor

interpret the *veda* skilfully enough. He suggested instead, that the sages were better fitted to receive the new scripture. Brahma, therefore, taught the *veda* to Bharata who set it down and, later, instructed his hundred "sons," by which is probably meant men who followed him in becoming authorities in music, dance, and drama. These "sons" of Bharata have been the cause of much confusion. Many writers after Bharata used this surname and so we have Adi-Bharata, Kohala-Bharata, Matanga-Bharata, and Nandikeshvara-Bharata.

Bharata conceives of all art as a whole. There is, for him, an essential unity of all artistic forms. The *Natya Shastra* makes the close relationship of music, dance, drama, and painting very clear indeed. Bharata says that it is the business of every artist to evoke emotion which he calls *rasa*. He enumerates eight such states and gives each a presiding deity and a colour equivalent:

<i>Name of rasa</i>	<i>Nearest equivalent</i>	<i>Deity</i>	<i>Colour</i>
Shringar	Love	Vishnu	Light-green
Hasya	Humour	Pramatha	White
Karuna	Pathos	Yama	Ash
Rudra	Anger	Rudra	Red
Vir	Heroism	Indra	Light-orange
Bhayanaka	Terror	Kala	Black
Bibhatsa	Disgust	Shiva as Maha-kala	Blue
Adbhuta	Wonder	Brahma	Yellow

Some later authorities mention a ninth *rasa*, Shanta or serenity. The presiding deity here is Narayana and the colour is the white of the lightly fragrant kunda flower. These *Nava-rasas*, nine basic emotions, are fundamental to Indian aesthetics.⁴

Dance is classified as either *margi* or *desi*. That which is sacred for the gods and danced for them is *margi*, while the dance for the pleasure of humans is *desi*. It is further described as *tandav* (masculine and associated with the god Shiva) or *lasya* (graceful, delicate, and gentle and associated with softer emotions). There are

three main components, *natya*, *nritta*, and *nritya* which, together with their subsidiaries, make up the classical dance-drama.

Natya is the dramatic element of a stage performance. There are three main points of resemblance between *natya* and the classical Greek drama. Bharata defines *natya* as "a mimicry of the exploits of gods, *asuras* (demons), kings, as well as of householders of this world" (16). This is similar to Aristotle's description of tragedy as an imitation of some action that is important, entire, and of proper magnitude. In both cases there is a purpose beyond pure entertainment. For the Greeks, tragedy effected, through pity and terror, the correction and refinement of such passions, that is, catharsis. The *Natya Shastra*, however, maintains that drama will teach, and, in addition, "give courage, amusement, as well as counsel" (15).

Aristotle's drama comprised fable, manners, diction, sentiments, music, and decoration. Bharata also enumerates six parts, namely decoration, postures, gestures, words, representations of temperaments, and music. Here the similarity ends, for to the Greeks, tragedy was the highest form of drama, and tragedy in the Greek sense did not exist in Indian drama. In Greek drama the emphasis is on hearing, hence Aristotle is primarily concerned with the plot or fable and the poetry in which this would be expressed. For the ancient Hindus the impact was mainly visual and so Bharata gives detailed attention to the manner of presentation.

Unlike Aristotle, Bharata does not forbid the representation of violent action on the stage, provided always that — however terrible — it is shown with control and beauty. Indian drama of Bharata's time is not bound by the unities of either time or place quite as strictly as is classical Greek drama, and its idea of unity of action too is somewhat different. The aim is rather towards a general unity of impression.

Nritta, or "pure dance," is the rhythmic movement of the body in dance. It visualizes and reproduces music and rhythm by means of abstract gestures of the body and hands and by extensive and precise use of footwork. *Nritya* is that element of the dance-drama which "suggests *rasa* and *bhava*" through facial expressions and appropriate gestures (4).⁵ Whereas *nritta* is concerned solely with movement, *natya* and *nritya* depict ideas, themes, moods, and

sentiments. This they do by using *abhinaya*, which derives from the Sanskrit word *abhi* meaning towards, and *ni* meaning to carry. The word thus signifies a "carrying to the spectators."

Since musical notes were first produced by the human throat, it is natural that Bharata and those who followed him should emphasize the pre-eminence of vocal music.⁶ They believe that the first instrument available to Man was the human voice which produced the primal notes and that, therefore, all man-made instruments should imitate or emulate the human voice. For them the purest and highest type of music is that which took its example from the human voice and which works on the principle of one note at a time. Over the centuries India has retained this principle and has developed, within its framework, an extremely sophisticated system of modal music known today as *raga* music.

If Christians believe that in the beginning was the Word, according to Hindu thought, in the beginning was Sound, that is, Cosmic Sound (*Nada*) or, as the Greeks termed it, "the music of the spheres." The musician is to use *swaras*, notes, as the poet words, the sculptor stone, or the dance-actor movement. Each in his or her own way has to evoke *rasa*. The *Natya Shastra* sets down the rules and makes suggestions to enable the creative artist to achieve this end. The *Natya Shastra* examines in detail every conceivable aspect of production: the ideal playhouse, metrics, prosody, diction, intonation, character types, appropriate costumes and make-up, the representation of sentiments and emotions, style in acting, movements of every limb, the setting and construction of a play, conventions of time and place, and even the canons of criticism and assessment. These instructions apply equally to acting and dancing for the two professions were combined. An indication of this is that the word for drama, *nataka*, derives from the word meaning "dance."

Bharata's book is as significant in India as Aristotle's *Poetics* is in the West. He was followed by a host of philosopher-critics who built up a most distinguished corpus of art theory. For historical and cultural reasons the classical music of the Indian subcontinent, though one in spirit, has developed along two separate lines. That which grew in north India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan is widely called the Hindustani style. The music that developed in

the south of the subcontinent is called the Karnatic style. The great names of the northern school are Amir Khusro in the thirteenth century and Miyan Tansen, three centuries later. Tansen was the court musician of the emperor Akbar the Great and it was he who classified the northern *ragas*. Venkatamakhi, who lived in the seventeenth century, is regarded as the greatest musicologist of the southern school; he regrouped all Karnatic *ragas* under seventy-two parent scales or *melakartas*, and his categories are still followed by the musicians of south India. Later, Thyagaraja and his contemporaries Mutthuswamy Dikshitar and Shyama Sastri widened the scope and repertoire of Karnatic music.

All Indian and Pakistani musicians belong to one particular *gharana* (house or school) or another. Each *gharana* has its own traditions and methods of rendition and these are fiercely defended and maintained. Ravi Shankar, the sitar player, and Ali Akbar Khan, the sarod player, for instance, belong to the *gharana* founded by Allauddin Khan and those whom they have trained naturally belong to the same *gharana*. In present-day India, there is a considerable amount of concourse between the north and the south, and the credit for having engineered this healthy trend must go largely to Ravi Shankar. It is now a common occurrence to have Karnatic artists performing in Delhi and their influence is obviously being felt. Popular Western music, however, has made a great impact on India. Much of the music in Indian films, for example, is provided by Western-oriented groups and bands. Indian film music — the most widely listened-to music in the country — is a hybrid of East and West. Its influence is so powerful that it is imitated even by the traditional folk musicians in the villages.

Dance in early India adhered to many of Bharata's injunctions. The most enduring Indian symbol is the figure of Shiva Nataraj or the Dancing Shiva. Shiva's cosmic dance is believed to encompass creation, preservation, and destruction, and this idea has been embedded in Hindu thought and ritual. In the monotheistic faiths of the Judaic tradition — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — dance is not an integral part of worship. This is because sacred dance had become associated with prostitution in the areas where these faiths first found expression. There is ample evidence in the writings of Socrates, Plautus, Eusebius, and others of sacred pros-

titution in West Asia and the Mediterranean region. The early Church Fathers led by saints such as Augustine (himself a notable sinner before his conversion) made sure, therefore, that the church was untainted by the income derived from dancing girls, who were, in effect, prostitutes. Music and drama, however, were not only sanctioned but actively encouraged.

India, fortunately for the art of dance, was not within the province of puritanism. The celebrated seventh-century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Huien Tsang wrote about the large number of prostitutes at the Surya temple in Multan, and later historians confirm similar practices in other parts of India. But it was in south India that sacred prostitution and sacred dance became fully institutionalized. The *devadasis*, "servants of the gods," were often highly cultured and sophisticated women whose company was sought by the nobility and landed gentry. Many became rich and influential, with property passing from mother to daughter (though sons were not altogether exempt). The daughters of *devadasis*, after requisite training, also became temple dancers. Their sons became *nattuvanars*, musicians, or dance masters. Thus the art of dance and music became an integral part of the *devadasi* "blood lines." Some families set a standard for both theory and practice. The musician Mutthuswamy Dikshitar and his pupils, the brothers Chinniyah, Punniah, Sivanandan, and Vadivelu Pillai deserve particular mention for their work. Their families and their disciples have continued the tradition to the present time.⁷ Although there are no *devadasis* in the temples today, there are many good dancers, dance *gurus* and musicians whose mothers and grandmothers were *devadasis*. They are, indeed, proud of their *devadasi* "blood lines" and are conscious of their contribution to Indian culture.

The dance style of the *devadasis* was known as *Dasi Attam*. The name has now been changed to *Bharata Natyam* in an obvious attempt by the middle classes of the new India to distance the dance from temple prostitution. The style is practiced by dancers all over India today. Its marvellous sculpturesque poses and clear, bold lines invest it with a rare quality. A feature of this dance is the interpretation of poems in praise of the gods. The dancer has therefore to master mime, eye, and neck movements.

The powerful all-male dance-drama from Kerala in southwest India is known as Kathakali. The artists are usually Nairs, members of the warrior caste of Kerala. They act out the words of the play that are sung by vocalists who stand behind them and, to the accompaniment of loud drumming, create moods by the use of gesture and mime. The material of the dance-drama is usually taken from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and deals with age-old conflict of good and evil. In its native setting a Kathkali programme always starts at nightfall and lasts through the night. The stage versions for city audiences are, however, edited and last about three hours.

Andhra state's *Kuchipudi* and Tamil Nadu's *Bhagvata Mela Nataka* were traditionally performed only by men of the priestly or Brahmin caste. Today men and women of any caste are permitted to train in either style. A soft, lyrical style of dance is the *Odissi* which took shape in Orissa state. Since the ninth century, there has been an unbroken tradition of temple dancing in Orissa: the male dancers were known as *gotipuas* and the women were called *maharis*. The leading dance *gurus* belong to *gotipua* and *mahari* families. From Manipur in east India comes the beautiful Manipuri style of the Meiti people and from Assam, in northeast India, comes the fascinating *Sattria*, which was originally danced by monks.

The *kathaks*, storytellers, of north India added music, dance, and mime to their repertoire to make their moral instruction more appealing. This was the origin of *Kathak*, the classical dance style of north India and Pakistan. Much of the dancer's material stems from the immortal love of Radha for the god Krishna, also called the Blue God or the Dark One. From Mughal times (sixteenth century onward) many Islamic influences were absorbed into *Kathak*. In its gestures, movement, and exciting footwork *Kathak* resembles the flamenco dance of the gypsies. The gypsies who found their way to Egypt and thence to Europe were originally a tribe of Hindu nomads, or *banjaras*, and their language, Romanian, is a corrupted form of Hindi. Among the lesser-known dance styles are the female solo *Mohini Attam* of Kerala and the *Chhau* dances of Seraikilla and Mayurbhanj.⁸

The early films⁹ in India borrowed extensively from the traditional forms of entertainment. Indian theatre from ancient times was an amalgam of dance, drama, music, and poetry, and the film, with the introduction of sound,¹⁰ was able to incorporate all these elements with ease. Thus, without being aware of it, the film-makers became the heirs of the great Sanskrit dramatists.

As in the theatre of old, the acting in the early films was stylized. The heroine, beautiful and innocent, and the villain, villainous for all to see, derived not from Victorian melodramas but from Indian plays of the past. Bharata specified in detail how various characters should conduct themselves and Sanskrit drama followed his dictates. Consequently, film acting too was clearly defined according to the role being played. Indian actors still specialize in playing role types rather than individuals, exactly like the practice common among Kathkali actor-dancers. Heroes, villains, heroines, mothers, aunts, "side-heroes," village idiots, jokers, and holy men are all immediately recognizable by their faces, dress, and behaviour.

Dance and music have migrated into Indian films and become an integral part of entertainment just as in Bharata's time. Except in a very few cases, however, dance, both folk and classical, suffered seriously. Each dance style taken up by the film industry began by being handled by experts in that style. All too soon choreographers who were talented but not devoted to that particular style made innovations, changed it, simplified it, and diluted it in an effort to make it more attractive or seductive and more easily entertaining to the untutored masses. Thus, each style in turn degenerated until it bore little resemblance to the original from which it sprang. Eventually, the language of many styles was mixed, and to this *mélange* were added elements taken from the West. The emphasis, in solo dance particularly, was more and more on seduction. Frequently nowadays, although there is great skill and energy evident in these solo dances, they are no more than crude and vulgar shadows of the truly erotic nature of their origins. Music, which has always been a *sine qua non* of popular Indian film, provides further evidence of the influence of Bharata on millions who are blissfully ignorant of the *Natya Shastra*. This film music was once firmly rooted in tradition. Of late it has moved further

and further away from its native soil having surrendered to the pervasive influence of Western pop. The result is complimentary to neither East nor West.

Most Indian films provide a vehicle for all of Bharata's *rasas*, a harmonious blend of which was his prerequisite for good drama.¹¹ The Indian film, therefore, at least the film which caters to a mass audience, retains almost all the ideals which Bharata set down. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference. Whereas Bharata reflected the taste and style of his time, the film of today echoes contemporary taste and style: Bharata set forth what might be regarded as the high culture of his time; film, dogged as it is by the need for commercial success, mirrors the common culture of its day although still purveying "courage, amusement, as well as counsel" to the spectator.

NOTES

- 1 Since divine sanction makes social practice acceptable and invulnerable, Aryan legends were raised to sacred status. The first of the four *vedas*, the *Rig-veda*, for example, concerns the heroic history of the "noble people" and their coming to India. The two great Aryan epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are mighty dramas of good versus evil in which, in the end, truth prevails. The *Ramayana* was, of course, a justification for Aryan incursions into south India with the Aryan man-god Rama as the hero and the King of Lanka, Ravana, cast as both demon and villain.
- 2 All learning in ancient India was embodied in books called *shastras*. Each *shastra* covers its subject in detail and represents, obviously, not the inspiration of a single man but the accumulation of a tradition codified in a single volume, sometimes by one whose name is known, sometimes by a person or persons whose names are not recorded. In the same way, the works of Homer could not have been produced out of the void of a barbaric society, but represent the acme of a long tradition of culture.
- 3 But there is much evidence of India's early music, dance, and drama. The earliest urban centres discovered on the subcontinent of India were Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley, now situated in Pakistan. This civilization, coeval with that of the Nile Valley, was highly organized and developed. From the excavations carried out under Sir Mortimer Wheeler there is evidence that the seven-holed flute and various types of stringed instruments and drums were in use in these two cities. Indeed, these musical instruments must have been used and perfected hundreds of years before they came into the hands of the expert musicians and dancing girls of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.
 One of the most significant finds at Mohenjo Daro was a beautiful little statuette of a dancing girl from which it would appear that dance too had achieved a considerable measure of discipline.
 By about 600 B.C., the philosopher Panini wrote the world's first book on grammar and prosody. From the internal evidence in Panini's book it is clear that the allied arts of music, dance, and drama had reached a sophisticated level in India. William Wilson Hunter, in his book *The*

Indian Empire, states that a regular system of notation had been worked out before the time of Panini and that this notation "passed from the Brahmans through the Persians to Arabia, and was thence introduced into European music by Guido d'Arezzo at the beginning of the eleventh century." The Benedictine monk Guido is credited with having invented the stave, the "Guidonian hand" to facilitate sight singing, as well as the ancestors of the sol-fa notes. If Hunter's theory is even partially correct, the Indian influence on the technical aspects of European music must have been not inconsiderable.

- ⁴ Nandikeshvara (whose dates, like Bharata's, are difficult to ascertain), provides in *Abhinaya Darpanam*, this hint as to how an actor or dancer might attempt to evoke *rasa*:

Where the hand goes, there also should go the eyes,
Where the eyes go, there should go the mind
Where the mind goes *bhava* (mood) should follow,
And where *bhava* goes, there *rasa* arises. (10)

- ⁵ The most important book on *nritya* is Nandikeshvara's *Abhinaya Darpanam*.

- ⁶ A parable, often recounted by traditional Indian artists, tells of a king who wanted to make sculptures of the gods and who went to a sage for instruction. "You will have to learn the laws of painting before you can understand the laws of sculpture," said the sage. "Then," said the king, "teach me the laws of painting." "It is not possible to understand the laws of painting," replied the sage, "without learning the art of dance." "So instruct me in the art of dance." "That would be difficult," said the sage, "as you do not know the principles of instrumental music." The king was, by now, getting impatient. "Then why don't you teach me instrumental music?" he demanded hastily. "But you cannot understand instrumental music," answered the sage, "without a thorough study of vocal music, for vocal music is the source of all arts." The king then bent low and begged the sage to instruct him in vocal music.

- ⁷ As late as 1927, there were 200,000 registered temple prostitutes in Madras Presidency alone, which was part of British India. And in the census of 1931 the point was made that many *devadasis* did not register themselves as such, but regarded themselves as married women by virtue of their "marriage" to the temple god.

- ⁸ Apart from the classical dances, India is particularly rich in folk idioms. Each area has its own special varieties — be they martial, seasonal, ritual, sacrificial, celebratory, instructional, or talismanic.

- ⁹ On the 7th July 1896, a year after the Lumières first exhibited their *cinématograph* in Paris, a film agent who had brought equipment and films from France started showing his moving pictures at Watson's Hotel in Bombay. This was an important day in the social history of the Indian peoples.

A number of Indian entrepreneurs plunged into the moving pictures business and Charles Pathé opened a branch in Bombay. By 1910, there were cinema halls in all the main cities and films had become an established part of city life in India. The films, however, were largely of foreign origin — French, British, American, Italian, German, and Danish. They were extremely popular but there was nothing "Indian" about them.

Indian film began with Dadasaheb Phalke (1872-1944) a Maharashtrian Brahmin of wide cultural interests, one of the fathers of India's film industry. While watching a film on the life of Christ, he became possessed of the idea that what India needed was a film based on her own vast religious literature. Phalke chose the story of Raja Harischandra from

the *Mahabharata*. It is a legend to do with honour, sacrifice, and mighty deeds. Thus the first Indian feature film, 3,700 feet long, was released in 1913 and exceeded even Phalke's expectations of success. *Raja Harishchandra* was followed by other films based on Indian mythology. (The popularity of the "mythologicals" was a phenomenon quite unique to India. The masses had hitherto only heard of the gods and demons in poetry and song; now, at last, they could see them — they could witness before their very eyes the revelations of the divine will. When Krishna appeared on the screen, for instance, people would join their hands in respectful attitude and on the slaying of a demon there would be thunderous applause.) Even today the "mythological" has its public. When the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were serialized on Indian television over the past few years, television viewing became a religious ritual. Television sets were garlanded and joss-sticks were lit and the family would sit respectfully, as if in a temple, to see for themselves the power and the glory of the Hindu gods and godlings.

During the early decades of this century there was a renaissance of the arts in Bengal under the leadership of Tagore. A new spirit of idealism had entered into the consciousness of the educated youth of Bengal and from among these a few moved into films. J. F. Madan produced *Nala Damayanti* which was based on an ancient Indian love story; Dhiren Ganguly's *England Returned*, *The Lady Teacher*, *The Stepmother*, and *The Marriage Tonic* became landmarks of social satire; Debaki Bose's *Chandidas* told the story of the sixteenth-century poet; and Birendra Nath Sircar founded the well-known New Theatres in Calcutta.

- ¹⁰ The Bengali husband-and-wife team Himansu Rai and Devika Rani, after an exciting film-making career in Europe with films such as *Karma* (1933), turned down offers from Hollywood and Germany to return home to start Bombay Talkies, which was to bring out a number of notable sound films, such as *Achhut Kanya* ("Untouchable Girl"). The first Indian sound film was *Alam Ara* (*Beauty of the World*) directed by Ardeshir Irani, released on 14th March 1931. This influential "talkie" was a turning point for India's film industry. Talkies were produced in many Indian languages and some of the silent film successes were re-made as sound films. Chandulal Shah, for instance, who had produced the first Indian social film *Gun Sundari* (*Why Husbands Go Astray*), now re-shot it in three languages. P. C. Barua, a maker of silent films also turned his talents to sound and produced *Devdas*, a classic of the Indian cinema. (Sound, incidentally, gave to the Indian film an immunity from foreign competition, audiences preferring, not surprisingly, to see films in their own language.)
- ¹¹ I should note that Indian theatre has been all but extinguished because the Bombay studios have flooded the country with their easily assimilable and therefore highly successful films. Television is also now making a tremendous impact. However, thanks to Satyajit Ray and others many fine films have been produced. In recent years, Mulk Raj Anand, Balwant Gargi, E. Alkazi and others have been attempting to forge a contemporary theatre movement.

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