

With Bharatendu Harishchandra
through the food-bazaar of *Andher Nagari*

Tatiana Dubyanskaya
Jagiellonian University, Cracow

Andher Nagari Chaupatt Rājā,¹ or *The Blind/Anarchic City [with] a Defunct King* (1881), also popularly known as *The City of Darkness*² or *The Lawless State* (Dimitrova 2004, 18), is one of the famous pieces by Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885). It is loved for its evergreen satirical message and a number of vivid scenes displaying the life of an Indian city. A short play of ‘folk-tale like character’ (Dalmia 1997, 313), it was created spontaneously by the author and staged by the ‘Hindu National Theatre (Natak Samaj) of Banaras, which consisted of a group of Bengali and Hindi speakers’ who regularly performed at Dashashvamedh Ghat (Hansen 1989, 83). *Andher Nagari* is neither a purely allegorical piece with straightforward political contents – like *Bhārat Durdaṣā* (*The Misfortune of India*, 1876), – nor is it a bizarre portrait of a contemporary city – like *Prem-joginī* (*The Yogini of Love*, 1874–5). Rather, in a concise form, it combines the features of both: set in an imagined Dark/Lawless City, the play, through a chain of fast-spinning events of a picaresque nature, makes fun of an ignorant raja, thus providing a ‘transparent satire’ of a state with authoritarian rule (Dimitrova 2004, 14). The plot is loosely based on a series of anecdotes about the legendary Raja Harbong, known for his ‘dim-witted, whimsical and often cruelly unjust treatment of his people’. Popular oral tales, among other episodes, narrate the sad conclusion of this reign: the

1. I dedicate this paper to Dr. Yulia M. Alikhanova, my mentor and supervisor during the years I spent studying and working at the Institute for Asian and African Studies, Moscow State University, as a token of my deepest appreciation of her knowledge and expertise, and heartfelt gratitude for her insightful guidance. The idea for this article was largely inspired by her fascinating lectures on India’s literary history.

2. This translation was popularized by the Amar Chitra Katha comic book *Andher Nagari*, *The City of Darkness* first published in 1974 (see, for example, *Andher Nagari* 2011; the same translation is used by Annie Montaut, see Montaut 2011). It may be an apt English title for this play, as it indicates the connection between the ancient Kāśī, the pure ‘city of light’, and its modern *avatār*, parodied by Harishchandra (Schilder–Callewaert 2000, 72).

famous yogi Gorakhnath tricked the ‘defunct raja’ into taking his own life (Dalmia 2006, 60).

According to Dalmia, the real popularity of *Andher Nagarī* in the theatre only started in the 1970s (Dalmia 1997, 314, n. 92); this short play (or, rather, farce), thanks to its funny and uncomplicated language and the light nature of the story, became an obvious choice for both amateur and professional theatre-groups in India, especially for school and children’s theatres. Thus, it is no surprise that of all the texts by Harishchandra, *Andher Nagarī* is the one that is easily-available on the somewhat unpredictable Hindi book market; its editions are often particularly targeted at younger generations – typically published as thin booklets, printed in a clear large font with amusing illustrations (see, for example, Hariścandra 2003).

The action in this six-act farce takes place in two areas: in the so-called *bāhya prānt*, or ‘premises outside [the city]’ together with *jaṅgal/araṇya* – the forest (Acts 1, 3 and 5), and inside the city – namely, at the bazaar (Act 2), at the king’s court (Act 4) and, finally, at the cremation-cum-execution grounds (Act 6). Similarly, the story revolves around two initially unconnected groups of characters – one from the ‘outside’ world, represented by three religious figures – a *vaiṣṇava mahānt* (chief priest) and his two disciples, and the other – the dwellers of the Dark City, their raja, and his retinue. The outsiders visit the city in hope to collect alms and get some food appropriate for the *mahābhog* (food offering) ceremony for their idol, Śrī Śālagrām Jī (the black stone image of Kṛṣṇa). At first, this simple task looks very promising: not only is the food in the city cheap and of excellent quality, but also the prices for all the items are very attractive – everything from vegetables to meat and fish costs one *tākā* (coin) for a *ser* (at present, the equivalent of ca. 0.93 kg). Soon enough, however, the prospect of having a great feast becomes bleak, as one of the young disciples called Gobardhandas, having decided to remain behind in this food-paradise, gets arrested and is sent directly to the gallows. The local police choose him as this city’s scapegoat for a minor crime, merely because he has a fat neck that could fit the noose, since all the citizens of *Andher Nagarī* are terribly underweight as they live in constant fear of their raja’s ill-temper. Gobardhandas’ life can only be saved by his clever guru, who lures the raja to the gallows, thus sparing his disciple and the whole city from the brainless authoritarian ruler.

One of the most memorable parts of this play is its second Act, which takes place at the city’s food-bazaar. Here, the author invites us to a literary feast, where captivating images of food-items are served, generously seasoned with humour and satire. The play as a whole, and this act in particular, can be called a brilliant example of Harishchandra’s art of ‘literary photography’: his

snap-shots, or, as he put it elsewhere, *chhāyāchitras* made with words,³ allow us to discover the vibrant life of this city-center, its air filled with the voices of vendors and smells of spices, kebabs, and sweetmeats. Together with Go-bardhandas as he inspects the food-stalls, the reader/spectator also becomes a *flâneur*, who observes and collects impressions of a happening urban space. As this paper will argue, even though the first impression may suggest that the events take place in an imaginary country ‘once upon a time’, there are enough details to betray the fact that Harishchandra used his own city of Banaras as the prototype for the City of Darkness. Hence, this paper suggests considering the second Act of *Andher Nagarī* as a valuable textual source that showcases the author’s keen interest in contemporary city-life and his intentions to create a satirical reflection of a larger society through the captivating imaginary of a food-bazaar. Analysing the pictures of the food-stalls and the sounds of the crowd and of the individual voices ‘recorded’ for us by Harishchandra – the utterances of the merchants, who are praising their goods, the exchanges between the vendors and the client, – this paper calls for the exploration of the fundamentally interactive nature of a traditional bazaar and its functions as an information hub and a community centre, as well as its ability to present the face of a city/country, since it displays the essence of an ‘area’s economy, technology, and society – in brief, of the local way of life’.⁴

In colonial times, European travellers often expressed their awe at ‘the bustle and colour of the oriental bazaar’ (Bayly 1983, vii); in the occidental imagination, the traditional bazaar provides a picaresque display of goods – things may be arranged inside the ground-floor shops, on tables, carts, or simply on some rags on the ground; customers/visitor typically move along the lanes of the bazaar, making their way through the cacophony of voices, enjoying the different smells, and resisting or succumbing to culinary temptations. Numerous travelogues and reports from the Orient spurred the imagination of writers and painters, who, in their turn, created inviting images of markets, where fruits and spices, luxurious carpets, heavy brocaded cloths, shining brass jars and ornate pottery were on display. The bazaar gradually evolved as a powerful cultural trope, serving as the ‘exoticized Other place of Western imagination’ (Yang 1998, 2):⁵ there, a visitor walks ‘peacefully and dreamily (...) inhaling the odour

3. Harishchandra’s fascination with his city and attempts to record the life therein are evident from *Prem-joginī*, a.k.a. *Kāśī ke cchāyācitra arthāt Kāśī ke do bhale bure fotogrāf* – ‘Reflections of Kāśī or a Couple of Good and Bad Photographs’ (Dalmia 1997, 303).

4. Eder 1976, 76, quoted in Yang 1998, 1.

5. Also, as Pratt suggests, bazaars prove to be crucial ‘contact zones’ between civilizations, ‘the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’ (Pratt 1992, 6).

of sandalwood',⁶ and at times is disturbed by a merchant praising their 'citrons from the South, sweet to tongue and sound to eye' and shouting 'come buy, come buy'.⁷ It is not rare to detect a mixture of fascination and embarrassment or even dread before the concentrated 'foreignness' of exotic markets: Victorian travel writers typically reported their shopping experience in Egypt as being a hard, if not hopeless exercise, primarily due to their inability to communicate with the locals. Travellers were in no hurry to become proper customers and to actually start buying things they fancied, or even to strike a simple deal, such as finding a guide or fixing a boat. Many reportedly preferred to abstain from any acts of interaction and 'derive full benefit from a bazaar simply by observing and documenting it' (Haddad 2006, 82). This happened not only because of the obvious language-barrier; the acceptable behaviour of a client presupposed the knowledge of general etiquette and specific gestures, but, most importantly, a readiness to actively engage in negotiations. For many, bargaining was specifically challenging as, according to Haddad, it meant ceding 'the inherently superior position of observers for that of participants'.⁸

The contacts between foreigners and oriental merchants described in 19th century travelogues demonstrate, in a very lucid way, at least two general features of an average non-Western market. Firstly, they highlight the market as 'a place of exchange' (*ibid.*), emphasizing its interactive nature, when both customers and vendors are involved in verbal and non-verbal interchanges; the accounts highlight two modes of behaviour – active participation in the act of buying, and choosing a passive role as an observer who admires the goods but does not shop. Secondly, such interactive situations are instrumental in distinguishing between insiders and outsiders: withdrawal from interaction is likely to be regarded as unnatural and foreign, whereas asking the price, discussing goods, and bargaining characterize a skillful, locally-rooted customer. Although Harishchandra's play showcases a person who is only an outsider, but not a foreigner (Gobardhandas does not know the local rules, but he is as 'Indian' as the majority of the vendors he meets), it does reveal the author's intuitive awareness of both these traits.

It is difficult to imagine that the environment of the local markets, famously spread along all the narrow lanes of the 'old city' of Banaras, felt exotic to

6. From Gustave Flaubert's *Voyage en oriente* (Flaubert 1980, 115).

7. From Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (written in 1859), a poem of a clearly Orientalist origin, betraying, among other emotions, a deeply rooted fear of all things that are foreign yet irresistibly-tempting (Rossetti 1993, 72).

8. '(...) it is principally the necessity of bargaining that sets the market apart from the master-tropes of theater and exhibition. While shopping, travelers can no longer remain confidently detached from what they observe, as they might in the theater of exhibit hall. If only temporarily, they occupy a subject position constrained by, rather than empowered by, the Egyptian setting' (Haddad 2006, 82).

Harishchandra, who, as Bayly put it, ‘came from the background of bazaar and temple’ (Bayly 1983, 453), but he was certainly strongly attracted to it. One feels that he was aware of the bazaars’ representative role, especially to the outsiders, who had to be impressed by the display of goods and the local manners in a different way to the city-dwellers themselves. The author’s keen interest in ‘recording’ street- and bazaar-scenes, in both *Andher Nagarī* and *Prem-joginī*, comes from his firm belief – at his time not yet shared by many – that there is value in contemporary events and common things surrounding us, which makes them worth being described and preserved, by means of literature, fine art or photography.⁹ Act 2 of the play in focus takes us through a happening urban space and supplies priceless hints about the behaviour or, rather, speech habits and mindsets of people at a typical North-Indian bazaar; thus, it appears to be a valuable source for investigating the role of a traditional market-place in the changing socio-cultural conditions of India in the late 19th century. Also, it needs to be underlined that Act 2 is the only part of the play which, in a concentrated way, establishes clear connections with the actualities of the 19th-century Indian life.

Harishchandra’s methods of depicting the city in a drama were somewhat limited – verbal portrayal was naturally chosen as the main tool of characterization; as Dalmia notices, he preserved the typical language of Banaras in *Prem-joginī* (‘on the borderline between Avadhī and Bhojpurī’), and used ‘many colourful idioms of the crooks, of the temple servants, of the Agarvāls, as they spoke it at home’ (Dalmia 1997, 304). Similarly, in *Andher Nagarī* the bazaar-scenes are constructed almost entirely with the help of speech characteristics. One may get an impression of a polyphony of voices; however, the vendors speak in turns, as if we follow a visitor moving along the rows of stalls. This illusion of progress is created by placing ten differently-arranged, richly-modulated monologues one after another. Actors could develop each vendor’s speech into an impressive one-man show: unlike the central character of the play – the raja, whose identity is hypothetical and whose portrait is purely comic,¹⁰ – the ten bazaar-types from Act 2 appear real, if not realistic, as they – one wants to believe – come directly from the streets of Harishchandra’s Banaras.

1. The *kabābvālā*, whom we hear first, briskly praises his mouth-watering meat preparations, seasoned with ‘with eighty-four spices, [roasted] on thirty-two kinds of fire – kebabs hot and spicy! Who tried, licked their lips, who did not, bit their tongue [in regret]’ (Hariścandra 1953, 969).

2. The next to appear is Ghasiram (this seems to be a clichéd name for a

9. As regards Harishchandra’s innovative approach to literature as a tool to ‘photograph’ the city, and photography as his hobby, see Dalmia 1997, 302-3.

10. For more detailed observations on how authorities and the ruler are ridiculed in *Andher Nagarī*, see Montaut 2011, 22-23.

man selling *canā*, parched chickpeas), who cooks his spicy sizzling snacks in a wok over charcoals. Not only are his couplets lengthier, but, in a sense, they are also more informative – this is the first time that the unnamed city acquires the features of contemporary Banaras. His *canā* is so popular among the citizens, that even Tauki and Maina, as well as Gafuran and Munnī – famous courtesans from Harishchandra’s time – ‘don’t want to hear about anything else’. Furthermore, satirical observations about the city’s notable communities are craftily woven into the advertisements of his famous snacks. All happily indulge in eating the chickpeas – ‘Bengalis in their loose dhotis’ (*jin kī dhotī dhīlī-dhālī*, read: ‘Bengalis not known for their bravery’), and the weavers-*miyāms*,¹¹ whose ‘pointed beards shake as they chew’. Above all, the men of power (*hākims*), once they try his *canā*, start ‘double-taxing everyone’ in excitement (*ibid.*). This is, indeed, the moment when the vendors, as Montaut puts it, ‘insidiously start subverting the genre of the street sellers’ shouting’ (Montaut 2011, 22) turning it into socio-political satire.

3. The performance of a citrus-vendor, *nāraṅgīvālī*, has a few humorous catchphrases,¹² but is also remarkable because it pins Andher Nagarī to the map of Colonial India: the oranges, tangerines, grapefruits, lemons, as she announces, come from Butwal in Nepal, Sylhet in Bengal (presently in Bangladesh), from Rambagh – the gardens inside the Ramnagar Fort of the raja of Banaras, and from Anandbagh, one of the central districts in the same city (Hariścandra 1953, 969).

4. The fourth seller, whose voice we hear, is a sweetmeat-maker, or *halvāī*. At first, nothing seems to challenge the blissful atmosphere of his shop. His voice lulls the customer: ‘Soft and delicate pies! Soft and juicy halwa! [All] dripping with ghee, soaked in syrup, dressed in souses! Who ate – regretted, but who abstained – repented! Rewari, crunchy rewari! Papad, crisp papad!’. He claims that he lives in harmony with ‘thirty-six nations’, that everyone is keen to call him ‘brother’. But then, he cracks a joke, that throws us back into the context of the British Raj: ‘Me in Andher Nagarī – as good as Calcutta’s Wilson in a *mandir*’ (*ibid.*), says the *halvāī*. Hinting that his shop is quite out of place in this messy city, he ironically connects himself to David Wilson, a Calcutta-based businessman, who started a confectionery/bakery in Calcutta and set up a famous Auckland hotel, in 1841, popularly known as Wilson’s Hotel (today, the Great Eastern Hotel). This place and especially its restaurant had a questionable reputation in the second half of the 19th century, as it served alcohol and beef to both Europeans and Indians (Roy 1999, 58). The parallel between Wilson and the traditional sweetmeat-maker, possibly, suggests their negative

11. *Miyām* is a respectful way to address a Muslim.

12. She plays with the word *nāraṅgī* – ‘orange’, and the expression *raṅg na raṅgnā* – ‘fail to fall in love’, complaining about the lack of romance between her beau (*priyā*) and herself.

role in society – the temptations they offer destroy morale from the inside.¹³ It is not a coincidence, then, that Govardhandas decides only to shop at the *halvāī*, which ultimately would lead him into trouble.

5. The green-grocer, *kuñjārin*, who sells various vegetables, herbs, and fruits, impresses with a long list of her goods – ‘falsa-berries, khirnis, mangos, guavas, limes, green peas, young chickpeas!’. And then: ‘Both working people and worthless folks, all citizens are consent [that] the veggies [cost] one-coin-*ser*! Buy the fruits of Hindustan – phut and bair!’ (Hariścandra 1953, 970). Here, Harishchandra plays with the double meanings of *phut* and *bair*, which, respectively, signify phuts – ‘exploding’ cucumbers resembling musk-melon, but also ‘split’/‘discord’ and the fruit of the ber-tree (jube, or *Ziziphus mauritiana*), as well as ‘enmity’. This intended pun makes it quite obvious that Andher Nagarī is a part of a much more complex metaphor: the satirical arrows are now undoubtedly pointed at present-day India herself.

6. Next comes the turn of fruits from abroad: before us appears the Afghan merchant, popularly called the Mughal. He names his delightful goods – ‘almonds, pistachios, walnuts, pomegranates, quince-seeds, raisins, figs, king almonds, plums, pine-seeds, apples, pears, quince, melons, grapes’ – but this is not all he has to say. The subjects discussed at this bazaar are now presented at an entirely new level, for the Mughal introduces current geopolitical affairs. ‘Hour kantree iz such, dat English broke hiz tooth. He only lost money and became like a fool’ – he informs us in his broken Hindi. ‘Hindustani people – weak-weak! Afghani people – brave-brave!’ (*ibid.*).

7. One of the most important numbers in the current sequence are the couplets performed by the so-called *pācakvālī* – she sells a well-known medicinal powder – *pācak cūrṇa* (here *cūran*) that helps digestion. It is only natural that in a city, where all goods, be they *khājā* (a kind of sweets) or *bhājā* (vegetables), cost the same one coin per *ser*, the citizens should be concerned about their digestive health. The vendor, in the typical manner, first praises the potency of her powdered sour medicines made with amla (myrobalan); very soon, however, what starts as an amusing advertisement with creative bywords and puns, grows into a rather gloomy picture of current socio-political life. The satirical message gets stronger with every line, as digestion-themed metaphors describe the confused state of India:

It is called the Hindu *cūran*,
but the effect of it is foreign.

13. According to a popular Bengali rhyme, Hindu *dharma* received fatal blows from the ‘three Sens’ in the 19th century – Keshob Sen (religious reformer), ‘Wil-sen’ (Wilson’s restaurant), and ‘iste-sen’ (railway-stations, where no caste/religion segregation was possible, especially when one visited the eateries) – see, for example, Chaudhuri 1990, 73.

When this powder came to India,
 it made minds weaker and purses thinner.
 The powder is so thick,
 it put everyone's teeth on the edge.
Cūran arrived at Dāl-maṇḍī,¹⁴
 now all the whores will eat it.
 The clerks in the court, once they consume the *cūran*,
 digest double [portion] of bribes;
 Having eaten the mixture, the actors
 start mimicking the clerks.
Cūran is eaten by the merchants,
 who then stomach the cash pretty well.
 The money-lenders eat this *cūran* –
 they suffer from mental maldigestion.
 Let the editors [too] eat *cūran*,
 since their stomachs can't process any words!
 Sahibs partake this powder
 and ingest the whole of Hindustan.
 Policemen who take it
 manage to process the laws in their bellies.
 Take a portion of *cūran* – pay a coin per *ser!* (*ibid.*)

8. The verse of the fishmonger provides temporary relief from the rather surrealistic modality of the previous vendor, yet it fails to bring any cheerful mood. Her sad couplet warns against the tenets of love: 'Eyes like fishes in the nets of beauty – are trapped the moment they glance. Fish without water, like a love-sick person, suffocates' (Hariścandra 1953, 971).

9. The next person we find is the *jātvālā*, literally, the seller of castes. This invented figure ridicules Brahmins, who offer *dharma*-related counsellings and provide centuries-old hereditary knowledge about people's family-trees and caste background. In these corrupt times, however, the *jātvālā* offers to exchange any given caste and religion for a 'better' one: to quote Vasudha Dalmia, this is Bharatendu's 'sweep at the upward mobilization, made possible by British insistence of classification of the varna status of caste' (Dalmia 2006, 61). The *jātvālā* says: 'For a coin, lies will be made into the truth. For a coin, a Brahmin into a Muslim, for a coin, a Hindu into a Christian. For a coin, I shall sell *dharma* and reputation, for a coin, I shall give false evidence (...). The Vedas, *dharma*, pedigree, honour, truth, greatness – all for a coin. I have looted precious goods – buy [paying] coin-per-*ser!*' (Hariścandra 1953, 971). This grotesque episode seals the impression about this 'Dark' place – it is evident that not only does it expose the colonial authorities, the weakness of the Hindustani people,

14. Lit., the lentil-market, a well-known wholesale market in Banaras, situated next to the brothel area.

the bribery of the bureaucrats, the stupidity of the ruling classes, and the laughable state of the country's affairs as a whole, but, most importantly, it speaks about the moral decline. Later on, when the action moves to the raja's court, the sad consequences of this degradation will become even more obvious.

10. Eventually, the *baniyā*, the shopkeeper in a grocery-store, puts an end to this surrealistic frenzy. The final voice in this sequence has a matter-of-fact quality, the vendor confirms the general idea of this market – since everything costs the same, there is no place left for normal seller-buyer rituals, no bargaining is possible, hence, the fundamental interactive nature of such a public place is compromised.

Therefore, the bazaar has served Harishchandra perfectly in his design to gradually unravel the subversive picture of Hindustan. He skillfully constructed the sequence of ten expressive voices, each adding a new perspective and a new depth to the case. Both the first and the final speakers sound completely plausible for a North-Indian market; the contents inside this frame, however, seem to be the result of a creative marriage of reality with the author's satirical fantasy. As has been demonstrated, the degree of parody and satire increases steadily, until the culminating point is reached in the speeches of the *pācakvālī* and the *jātvālā*.

At the same time, Harishchandra's mode of depicting the market-place allows us to investigate the relationship between an alienated visitor, who is moving along its lanes and stalls, and the object of his interest – the stationary, albeit buzzing, world of the bazaar. In fact, it is possible to differentiate between the two kinds of visitors here: one is a hypothetical spectator/reader, an imaginary guest, a detached observer, who is following the author in this excursion, another is Gobardhandas himself, whose journey starts at the very moment the grocery merchant finishes his speech: 'Enters Baba's disciple Gobardhandas; he listens to the voices of all the sellers; delighted with the food, he rejoices' (*ibid.*). The colourful speeches of the ten vendors will not be repeated for a second time, Govardhandas' progress along the rows of shops will have to be imagined. As we already know, at the end, he spends all the alms he had received on sweets and leaves the bazaar, having failed to interpret the crucial piece of information revealed to him by the *halvār*: that the place is called 'The City of Darkness', ruled by the 'Defunct raja' (or, using Montaut's translation, 'the King of Mess' – see Montaut 2011, 23).

It is tempting to recognize Gobardhandas as one of the first *flâneur*-like figures reflected in modern Indian literature and interpret his discovery of the bazaar in terms of a modern cultural appropriation of an urban space; at the same time, it might be too far-fetched an idea to look for many similarities between this Indian figure and Benjamin's 'heroic pedestrian', given all the complexity of the latter's character and the nature of his relationship with the city and the crowd (Gilloch 1996, 241). Still, specific urban situations depicted both in this play and in *Prem-joginī* may point at Harishchandra's search for a mod-

ern hero, a city type well fit to represent the environment, and also a keen and engaged observer of street life.

Thus, Gobardhandas' journey through this City of Darkness seems to bear a greater cultural significance than the story itself might suggest. It may not be surprising that, being a traveller and a somewhat aloof observer, this character managed to step out from the frames of *Andher Nagari* and start an independent literary life. His second birth happened in 1995, when a Malayali writer Anand (P. Sachidanandan, born in 1936) chose Harishchandra's Gobardhandas as the protagonist of his own socio-critical novel *Govardhan* (Anand 2006). Disturbed by the fact that in the Hindi farce the young disciple's fate was decided through a faulty legal procedure,¹⁵ the writer transferred the 'character from fiction into the historical world', to a different temporal and spatial context. His novel starts almost at the same point where Harishchandra's play ends and 'tells the story of Govardhan's journey through centuries of India's history' (Kumar 2008, 193), thus exemplifying this character's potential of collecting impressions *en route* and his inquisitive nature.

15. 'Walking this path, I do not remember exactly when I arrived at Bharatendu's Andher Nagari. This work, described as a light farce, moved me deeply (...) Govardhan, a passer-by, was finally led to the gallows because his neck happened to fit the noose!' (Anand 2006, 5-6).

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