# Contours of Community Identity: Native Place on the Other Side of the Border

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**Abstract:**

*The long, festering afterlife of the Partition of India (1947) witnessed histories of identity formation—of the Partition-displaced and that of the hosts. In each community's perception of the other, this strain of otherness, we suggest, became an organizing template in their respective identities—a template that has survived through the historical transformations of the respective identities over time. So in the place of their resettlement, the Partition-displaced people are largely identified by the hosts as a community who trace their nativity, their sense of belonging, to a place located on the other side of the border. On the other hand, for the Partition displaced, the reinvention of the community in a new place is not always easily accomplished. This is because the history of everyday life in the place of resettlement creates new contingencies that challenge and transmute the agenda of preserving the tradition of the "desh" (native place) left behind. Still, these people would create a community of remembrances. For them this act of remembering is an emotional one, as well as a sincere one, if not a terribly intense one. With fellow Partition-displaced every reiteration-discussion about the left-behind 'desh' or native place, every memorialization, socializing—all would further promote the formation and consolidation of the community identity and creation of boundary(ies). As a result, the community of "desher barir lok"—people of my native land—continued to exist in the place of resettlement. In this paper, with the help of oral narratives of the Partition-displaced people, the present author will try to locate how the memories situated in a different space-time facilitated community identity formation in the place of their resettlement.*

**Key Words**: Oral Narratives, Community, Identity, Partition, Resettlement, Memory.

## Introduction:

With the Partition (1947)-induced displacement, there emerged memories of pain and grief; the nostalgia for the lost 'home,' the kin, and folks; and the obligatory determination to create a new 'home' in the place of resettlement. All these are certainly difficult things to capture 'factually' in history. Still, these have their claim to have their place in history. In other

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words, there is a very strong sense in which the afterlife of Partition in one part of India is different from another, and that is the historicity. I have selected my respondents from North Bengal, as it was felt that the experience of the northern part of Bengal was very different from the western part and Kolkata.

When the displaced people tried to create a space for their selfhood, there was also a process, inseparable and concomitant, a process of place-making. This is situated in a historical situation, and this requires the historian's attention by its own merit. The sentimental and nostalgic aspects of remembrances also refer to a more complex phenomenon, which has significant historical material and ideological parameters. Indeed, the concepts of space and place have in recent years very forcefully come up as meaningful lines of inquiry and critical reading in the social sciences. The migrant people had to adjust to differences—differences in natural environment, topography, host society, culture, and so on and so forth. Homemaking is not a simple process. Also, the reinvention of the community is not always easily accomplished, as the history of everyday life in a new place creates new contingencies that challenge and transmute the agenda of preserving the 'tradition' of the '*desh*' (native place) left behind. When identity is to be reformulated, readjusted, or reasserted, it has to take note of different agencies outside of the displaced communities. Complicating the afterlife, the host society in India contributes in its own way in not only reconstituting its own identities as a response to the post-partition influx but also in inscribing its own signature on the process whereby the immigrants seek to emplace themselves as a community and create an identity of their own.

For my purpose, working with oral narratives appeared to be a pertinent methodology. But remembrances are often discounted as 'sentimental and nostalgic' and are unfortunately not read with a critical mind that argues for socially and historically sensitive rehabilitation of emotions around a left-behind place and a newly acquired space, where placemaking making begins amidst great complexities. So let us first start with some methodological concerns about oral sources.

## I. Some Methodological Concerns

*'The narrator not only recalls the past but also asserts his or her interpretation of that past, and in participatory oral history projects the interviewee can be a historian as well as the source.'* (Perks and Thompson 2003, Introduction).

When used as a source, 'oral history' can open new windows to explain experiences of people within the constraints of the discipline of history. The most important contribution is highlighting the role of subjectivity in history and thereby opening new horizons of historical inquiry; in Luisa Passerini's (Passerini 2003, 54) words, 'oral sources refer to and derive from a sphere which I have chosen to call subjectivity.' A methodology of giving importance to the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered helped to include hitherto neglected, if not untouched, areas of historical inquiry. '…we should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimension of memory, ideology, and subconscious desires' (Passerini 2003, 54). However, assuming that oral history projects are providing a scope for the members of oppressed groups to 'speak for themselves' invites another problem. Inherent in the methodology of using 'oral history,' there might lie an attitude of 'facile democratization' and 'complacent populism' of oral history projects. A historian should be critical enough to locate how and in what ways memories might be influenced by dominant histories and thus require critical interpretation. But these cautions cannot minimize the importance of oral sources. As a matter of fact, in historical inquiry, we cannot discount oral or any other sources relevant for a particular study. Because oral and written sources are not mutually exclusive, both of these possess qualities and questions on their validity, and in a particular aspect of study, one of them can be a better fit than the other (Portelli 1991).

The debatable status of memory calls for some clarifications regarding why memories should be used as the source material for reconstructing history. Memory is not only a passive repertoire of 'facts' but also an active process of creation of meanings of those 'facts.' On the other hand, research shows that memory is never 'pure' or 'unmediated.' Who remembers, when, with whom, and how? All of these shape the interviews. But how people choose to remember an event is also important for history. Scholars have rightly recognized that the interview situation depends on an interaction (Frank 1978). But it is also inaccurate to suppose that the interviewer is weaving the interview for his or her purpose. The interviewer's response, of disapproval or approval, of encouragement or indifference, of more intense listening to some things than to others, without any doubt plays a role, but the different themes narrated by the respondents ultimately depend on them. We cannot simply discount the oral narratives of the Partition, as 'Memory, then, is far more complicated than

what historians can recover, and it poses ethical challenges to the investigator historian who approaches the past with one injunction: tell me all' (Chakrabarty 2000, 318).

**II : 'New Home' and 'New Neighbors':**

Everyone who had to migrate had an established sense of themselves in the place where they used to live. During their resettlements, they continuously remembered, compared, contrasted, and mourned for 'that place,' which is very frequently referred to as '*desher bari*.' So, there is a 'there' in shaping the identities of the migrants here. The seemingly sentimental and nostalgic remembrances can point to a number of layers of various themes of the Partition, such as socio-economic and cultural displacement and tearing all ties with the environment around them. Crossing the border was a 'solution' for them. This was followed by their efforts to recreate the 'home.' In this process the presence or absence of the mundane elements of everyday living made the difference, made this place 'different.' Differences regarding houses, natural atmosphere, topography and soil, non-existence of ponds, availability of fish, and the socio-cultural differences with the native people are frequently remembered motifs, with the help of which this place is contrasted and compared with the place left behind.[2]

The Rajbansis have the major share in the population of North Bengal, especially in the districts of Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri. There are also the Rabha, Mech, Polia, Bhutia, Lepcha, Garo, Toto, and other tribes. The Rajbansis speak Bengali, but it is a local dialect, sometimes widely different from standard Bengali. Their physical features show Mongoloid origins, and their lifestyle did not conform to so-called 'civilized' norms. Their food habits, dressing, and cultural practices were also different. In North Bengal, large-scale transfer of land from Rajbansis to non-Rajbansis had started in the late nineteenth century. Apart from the changes that were taking place in the economic sphere as a result of war, depression, and famine in Bengal, another important reason for land transfer to the non-Rajbansis was the migration of a large number of people to different districts of North Bengal (Basu 2003). A report of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department of the Government of West Bengal of 1974 shows that by then 442,500 partition-displaced people had come to Cooch

[2] Interviews used in this essay are recorded by the author and preserved in '*Remembering the Native Place: A Nucleus of Social Memory among the People Displaced by Partition of India* (1947), a SEPHIS-funded digital archive under the Department of History, Jadavpur University.

Behar and 249,000 people had come to Jalpaiguri. This influx of people led to a growing demand for land and a rise in land prices. In Jalpaiguri, while the number of *jotes* held by the Rajbansis decreased, those held by the Marwaris, the upper-caste Bengali middle-class people, and others increased sharply. In Cooch Behar too, the people from outside, those who were mostly in the administration of the Cooch Behar state and were perceptively more resourceful than the local inhabitants, grabbed a large number of *jotes*. By 1872, in Cooch Behar, 54 percent of the revenue-paying lands had passed into the hands of outsiders (Sarkar, 1990). Indeed, all over North Bengal, this phenomenon of transfer of land from the hands of the Rajbansis became a standard pattern, and in course of time it generated a sense of grievance among the dispossessed Rajbansi gentry.

There were sharp dissimilarities between the cultural practices of these two groups. The migrated people used to refer to the Rajbansis as *bahe*; the usage was informed by the conscious ascriptions of cultural inferiority. The word '*bahe'* was a distortion of the word '*babahe*,*'* by which the Rajbansi generally addressed a person (Basu 2003). Thus the migration became instrumental in forming 'us' and 'them,' in forming '*bhatia*' and *'bahe (the* migrated people were called '*bhatia'—it*' meant people who had come from '*bhatir desh'* or land of ebb). In such conditions comparisons were used not only for consolidation of the identity of the migrated people but also for the consolidation of the identity of the Rajbansis. Later on it took on an ethnic dimension as the Rajbansi elites tried to raise caste sentiments among the members of their community. Around the demand for Kshatriya status, a movement among the Rajbansis was perceptible from the early years of the twentieth century (Basu 2003; Barman 2007); they asserted their caste status amidst the waves of caste movement of that period, and they took certain steps towards what might be called 'sanskritization' (Srinivas 1962).

But confrontations with the migrant 'other' on a daily basis, as their neighbors, gradually accelerated the process to mark their community with markers of high caste. '...the socio-cultural traditions of the Koch-Rajbansis have been raised as the proofs of their distinct cultural identity' (Barman 2007, p.147). Recently this has been recognized by the Rajbansis, especially the educated Rajbansis. Now they fall back on a different kind of memorialization, memorialization of what they consider to be their pristine culture, and this finds expression in organizing programs demonstrating their culture, publishing dictionaries (Rajbansi language

to standard Bengali), publishing many little magazines on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis, etc.

But it is not always true that '...the attitude of cultural superiority of the immigrant upper-caste Hindus and their general tendency to look down upon the Rajbansis prevented a closer relationship between the two' (Basu 2003 p.64). Here the oral narrative comes to our help to find out the nuances in the interaction of communities. The first reaction of most of my respondents about the Rajbansis on this side was about the warmth of reception, helpful nature, hospitality, and simple but cordial behavior. They did not hesitate to help them to be settled or to bear the burden of the population. For example, I quote one of my respondents, Nirmal Krishna Pandit: '*…asole rajbansira eto sorol prokritir lok chilen, amra je purba banga theke esechi, tader opor je barti ekta chap porlo…..seta tara takhono bujhe nai, sutorang keu kono kichu tader kache chaile seta prai bina poisaie diye dito….'* (Actually, the Rajbansis were so simple that they did not understand that as we, the people of East Bengal, came, it meant an extra burden on their resources. So when a person asked for something, they took almost no money for that). Others also referred in a similar way: '*…onader achoron byabohar khub valo lagche, kothai bari , kotah theke aschen. amader barite aso, paan gua khao, cha khao, thako, eder jothesto sohojogita. karon amar mone ache ekhaner jara rajbansi… Purba Banglar jato lok dukche, prothom rajbansider ashroiyei niyei tara, tader songe attiyota, bondhu bandhob, matha gojar ekta astana koira tara dhire dhire agaiche… help korche. Tara jodi ashroi na diten ba help na korten tahole dakhkhin desira eidike aise daraite partenna…'* (Their behavior was really good and cordial. They asked about our home and where we had come from, also asked to visit their house, asked to have betel leaf and 'guya' [betel nuts, which are kept under the soil for some time], and tea. They also asked to stay in their house. They really helped. I remember the people who came from East Bengal; they were initially given shelter by them, they made friends and relations with them, and they made shelter for the family. Then they gradually moved on. If the Rajbansis did not offer shelter and help, the people of the south could not establish themselves here), reported Phanindra Chandra Dey.

*'Asar por byabohar khub valo korche, sahajyo korche… ghor tor korate, bansh chaichi, je amar to dewani bansh lagbe, ghor korbo ami, koi je nen kyane.'* (When we came, they behaved really well; they helped. For example, when I asked for bamboos to make rooms, they readily gave them), reported Naresh Chandra Sarkar. Some people did not need their

help. Sunil Kumar Paul says, *'byabohar chilo opurbo, sahajjer prosno asenai'* (behavior was really nice, but we did not need their help). *Takon ora khub bhalo chilo, tomare je dekhbona, tomare khub bhalobasbo, ekkere pran dia bhalobasbo… ei je tomar thakur dada rajbansigo mama, kaku koira dakto, ar tarao bhaigna bhaigna koira poran dito, kriya korme nimontron hoito, amra kriya kormo korle oder nimontron kortam, orao kriya kormo korle nimontron korto…* (Then they were really good; they would love you from their heart. Your grandfather (her husband) regarded them as uncles, maternal uncles; they also loved their nephew and could do anything for him. During celebrations we invited each other) reminisced, Phuleshwari Roy.

They also established kinship relations with these people through marriage and through a local custom as well. In North Bengal, the Rajbansis used the custom of '*jal chitano*' (literally meaning 'sprinkling of water) to make close relations with people who are not related by blood, as after performing the ritual these people are regarded as blood relations. Subhash Chandra Saha Roy has such a son here ('*amar to ek chelei ache jol chita byata bole ekhane*'). But both the communities mocked one another as well, as each of them held the other different from themselves. The migrant population called them *'edeshi,'* and the natives called them *'bhatia.' '… eder kach theke to kono rokom kharap byabohar painai, majhe majhe dui ekjoner thika, - tone korche bangal bole, bhatia bole, ar amrao tader takon boltam 'koch,' 'bahe' ei arki…'* (I did not receive any ill treatment from them; sometimes some of them taunted us as '*bangal*' and '*bhatia*,*'* and we also taunted them as '*koch' and* '*bahe*.' It was nothing more...) - Benimadhab Debnath. However, this acceptance of the migrants by the pre-existing Rajbansis of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts is not uncomplicated.

Initially the mocking and taunting were not used to insult or to disrespect, but as time went on and more people came from East Bengal, the situation changed. Nitya Ranjan Sarkar , from his own experience, explained the difference. He came to Cooch Behar district first in 1944. He then went back, and finally, with his family, he shifted to Cooch Behar in 1962. He says, *'…oi time tai khub valo byabohar paitam, kintu jakhon partition hoya gelo takhon ora khub hinsa kore ….bhatia shobdota byabohar kore besirbhag, desi- Bhatia shobdo tole.'* (Earlier they behaved really well, but after Partition their hostility came to the surface). It is difficult to ascertain when the behavior of the host population changed and to what extent. Because a number of people who came during the later years of the 1960s assert that the behavior, the reception of the host population, was good enough. This change may also have regional-local

variations. It seems that simplicity of mocking denoted humiliation later. But it changed over time; it is a lived experience, *'ekon jeno kemon hoiche na eirokom chilona.'* (They have changed their behavior nowadays; it is different from their previous cordial behavior), pointed out Phuleshwari Roy.

**III. The Community Left Behind: '*desher barir lok*':**

What is more striking is that even the people from East Bengal do not always form 'us.' At one level, they are all '*desher barir lok* (people of native land), but at another, they often refer to the people of the same district or village, exclusively, as *'desher barir lok.'* At the same time, paradoxically, the people of that same village or district now fail to confer the sense of '*desher barir lok*,' the community left behind. 'We need to ask questions about how the 'us' and 'them' are constituted or reconstituted—in and by these accounts' (Pandey 2001, 197). The re-creation of the community is not always easily accomplished, as the history of everyday life has many details, which always compare and contrast and mess things up. When asked whether you still have such relations with your neighbors or with people who came from your district or village, the answer was 'no.' Some initially stated that they had good relations, but later they found that something was lacking. It was quite natural that they required time to build up cordial relationships with neighbors, as '*…jara amra notun, tader sathe porichiti, antorikota hoite ektu deri hoilo ….porichiti hoite ektu samay darker …prothom prothom ektu dwidha chilo, ar purba banglai jakhon chilam prottekei amar bhagi - gusti, gram basi, bondhu bandhob…*' We, who are new here, needed time to know each other; initially, we had hesitations. But in East Bengal all the neighbors were my relatives, fellow villagers, and friends), stated Phanindra Chandra Dey.

The people had to manage for a steady supply of basic needs, so they became completely self-absorbed. At least for the initial years, they did not have enough resources to welcome others with that cordiality that they once did. '*Eikhane to ota nai, eikhane sokolei aisa oprostut obosthai porche. 'Thik hoite paach bochor-choi bochor lagche, onekeri, ar jara onek taka paisa nia asche tader ektu subidha, ei arki*,' said Naresh Chandra Sarkar. (Here we do not have such relations. Here everybody found themselves in awkward situations. To overcome the initial problems, many people needed five or six years. And whoever could come with enough resources had certain conveniences).

People came from different villages, so they could not be expected to show comparable cordiality: *'Eikhane oto chilo na, eikhane to ek ekjon ek ek gram theke asche, sei jonyo oto*

*relation chilo na. 'Eikhane dhoro ek khane amra pachta bhai achi, oikhane pach jon onno bhai chilo……samajikota komche, selfishness barche*,' acknowledged Bireshwar Saha. (Here we did not have such relations; say, here five brothers are living together, and there five different people who were not relatives but had brother-like relations lived together. Here cordial behavior with others has decreased, and selfishness has increased). The migrant people certainly show hospitality, but their behavior does not convey that cordiality. According to Nitya Ranjan Sarkar, '*eikhane jemon refugee elakai achi, ekon Mathabhangai achi. khawai na, ekotha na… kintu ei je jor kore these dewa, ei jinista t nai….ei jonye mone hoi oi khawatar modhye alada ekta shanti paitam. aponotto besi chilo.'* (Here, we are living in a refugee area, Mathabhanga. It is not that people do not offer to eat, but exhorting somebody to eat is lacking here. So I feel that the hospitality of the people of "*desher bari*" conveyed a different degree of cordiality).

From his observation, Parimal Kumar Das notices that the relation between neighbors cannot be the same anymore, as there is the importance of fencing, and tension remains between each other regarding this. He describes that in their '*desh*' they paid less importance to fencing. When somebody has to ask for the permission to enter another's home, cordiality disappears. So, a problem regarding acquaintance remained. As self-identity has the other related nature, with its accompanying fear of rejection, so it is a distress maker, and it guides the human effort to be familiar to avoid that. Dr. Nirod Chandra Sutradhar pointed out, '*porichitir ekta samasya thekei jai. Ekhane ese porichiti korte hoyeche, sei porichiti korar jonyo nijosso samasya prochur hoyeche…onek botsor choila jai porichiti hoite hoite'.* (A problem regarding familiarity and acquaintance lingers on. I had to make myself familiar with others. For that I had to face many problems; it needed many years to get acquainted).

At present, the communities continue to live, but perhaps not as they once used to. Still, new relations grew, but comparison remained, and also remained a sense that something was lacking. People tried to find that flavor of cordiality, fellow feelings, among the people who came as migrants, more specifically, among the people of the same district or village, if they were available. So for Sandhya Das , in the absence of people from her native district of Mymensingh in her neighborhood, one family from the neighboring district of Dhaka is referred to as *"desher barir lok."* She rationalizes it by saying, *'Dhaka ar mymensingha to besi dure na'* (Dhaka and Mymensingh are not really far from each other, you know).

For others, people from the same district in their neighborhood are referred to as the people of 'desh.' Among the unfamiliar people, the people from the village or nearby area assured them that they were not unknown. As Binoy Kumar Poddar pointed out, '*…eikhane jakhon aschi takon to aporichito sabai , sudhu desher barir dotto-bonik jara chilen tara baba-jyathake chinten…'* (When we came here, everybody was unknown; only the Datta-Baniks [same caste] of *desher bari* knew father and uncles). On the other hand, Sunil Kumar Paul could not find a single family from Khulna, so to him, *"we are alone."* So without those people, it is not possible to engage in nostalgic conversation about the 'desh' or to disburden the mind. '*Desher bari kothata sochorachor byabohar korina, karon sei desher lok to kauke paina, je desher bari ei chilo, oi chilo segulo ar karo songe alochona korte ichcheo kore na, ar kichu alochona korte gele mone hoi sobai jeno byango korbe'!* (I do not generally use the phrase *desher bari* because I do not come in contact with people from that place. So I do not feel like talking about what was there in 'desher bari.' I fear that people would mock me). Though he had made really good relations in his present address, he added, '*Amr*a *jesomoy esechi….amader Mathabhanga townta te je koijon lok chilo, amader somporko chilo dada-bhaiyer.'* (When we came, the few people of this town—Mathabhanga—used to share brotherly relations).

Even at another level, the people of the same district do not continue to share the sense of the same community. Kamala Sen says some of the pujas are not observed now because those were group efforts, and '*oi lok kothai pabo*' (where can I find those people}? Though some of his near relatives have come to the nearby area, the community has broken down. For Subhashini Roy, though many people in her neighborhood came from the same district, Mymensingh, they are not comparable to the community left behind, because she found that they mock some of their local customs (e.g., *' shoyla puja'*).

**Observations:**

These people tried to (re)create their community by continuing their customs, *broto*, puja, and cooking styles. Some districts and localities have certain pujas and *broto*s, which are regarded as compulsory to observe for the people of that certain district and locality. This is also a way by which they differentiated among people from different districts of East Bengal (e.g., Manasha Puja is compulsory for the people of Mymensingh, Kartick Puja for Faridpur, and when a person from Faridpur would be asked about Manasha Puja, he would refer that this is not the compulsory puja of our *desh*, but it is compulsory for the people of Mymensingh). It

is clear that there is a sense of dismemberment, and a need for reconstruction is very much present in their efforts. But when there is a sense of continued existence of the community, there is also a sense of rupture that comes to the surface.

It has also been noted how their sense of *'desh'* is encapsulated in time. Now, that place, where '*desh'* was situated once, fails to convey the same sense of belonging. A number of persons, at one level, therefore feel a strong desire to visit the land; at the same time, there is a fear that changes might have been so effective that the land they knew once would never convey the same sense of belonging. Some, who have visited, found such experiences. There is an immense pain that their beloved motherland had lost its flavor in the course of time. Ashok Maitra had started his journey to see his motherland, but he returned from Dhaka without visiting his ancestral village, as he could not gather enough mental strength to see and accept the changes he saw on his way to his village, Dhubulia (district: Pabna). He added, *'Jabo kothai aar, bhab deikhkhai to amar obostha kharap. ... age to oita india chilo….khawa, pora, chola .....bivinno towne gele , subdivision town e gele shotkora pochashi jon hindu chilo, ponerojon musalman chilo. ki kore je oita pakistan holo…… amar mathat modhye to eitai dhuklo na'.* (How could I proceed? I saw the changes so striking that they frightened me enough before the Partition that was India in terms of food habits, culture, daily life, and everything. When you visited any subdivision town, you could find eighty-five percent of the population was Hindu and only fifteen percent was Muslim. How that land was included in Pakistan, I could never understand that. Here he refers to the fading of Hindu culture that was once the dominant culture of these towns. Such assertions are not exclusively made by the Bengali bhadraloks. One can draw a parallel to the nostalgia for Delhi, which once was '*ek Musalmanon ka shahar*' (City of Muslims). [It strictly does not talk of numbers but historical and cultural influences].

**Conclusion:**

While trying to draw the contours of community identity, the present essay has resisted the tendency to discount oral narratives of the immigrants and the host society as 'sentimental and nostalgic'; rather, it tried to critically read them in order to work towards a socially and historically sensitive rehabilitation of emotions around notions of 'left behind place' and 'newly acquired space,' on the one hand, and 'submergence under the refugee influx,' on the other. This paper has also demonstrated that the two groups of the hosts and the immigrants were not perpetually in contest with one another, nor was their relationship outright

antagonistic. But it was a much more complex reality. With the successive waves tilting the land-human ratio in the area in favor of land, the resilience of the ethics of charity of the hosts came to be severely tested. On the other hand, the tendency on the part of the post-Partition immigrants to ceaselessly reiterate emotional attachment to a left-behind '*desh*' and thus constitute themselves into a community of remembrance had the potential of widening the gap between the host society and the immigrants. The history of the long-festering afterlife of Indian Partition in this particular geographic locale demonstrates that the 'otherness' that the host society and the immigrants generally came to invest in each other remained an abiding post-Partition template in the region, even though their narratives transformed over time.

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