



Development of Materialism in India: the pre-Cārvākas and the Cārvākas

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## DEVELOPMENT OF MATERIALISM IN INDIA: THE PRE-CĀRVĀKAS AND THE CĀRVĀKAS

Ramkrishna Bhattacharya

The existence of more than one materialist school before the Cārvāka (eighth century) has been admitted by modern scholars.<sup>1</sup> They have used different nomenclatures to denote the pre-Cārvāka and Cārvāka materialist systems. I prefer to use simpler names, «old materialism» and «new materialism».<sup>2</sup> Unlike them, however, I do not propose to confine the Pre-Cārvāka materialists to the period before the Common Era. My contention is that such schools appeared even in the Common Era and they existed side by side for a long time.

The radical departure made by the new materialists (the Cārvākas) was most apparent in the field of epistemology: even though the ontology of the old and the new materialists was similar, the partial acceptance of inference as a valid means of knowledge marked off the new materialists from the old ones. The *sūtra* work most probably redacted by Purandara seems to have retained the old form of the aphorism: *nānumānam pramānam*, inference is not an instrument of valid cognition. Purandara and following him Aviddhakarṇa and Udbhaṭabhaṭṭa took pains to assert that inference based on perception is perfectly admissible but an inference on the basis of verbal testimony or authority was not.<sup>3</sup> If we do not want to appear uncharitable to Hemacandra and others who continued to ridicule the Cārvākas for not admitting inference as such,<sup>4</sup> we must say that their understanding of «new materialism» was faulty; they failed or more probably refused to distinguish between the old and new approaches.

<sup>1</sup> Frauwallner (1997, vol. 2: 219) speaks of the oldest Materialistic doctrines of Puraṇa Kāśyapa, Ajita Keśakambalin and Kakuda Kātyāyana and (*Ibidem*: 221) the Lokāyata system (which Frauwallner believes «arose in pre-Christian period» and one Cārvāka was its founder). Franco and Preisendanz (1998: 179) call them «Early Materialists» and «the Classical Materialistic Philosophy» (sixth century).

<sup>2</sup> In his tenth thesis on Feurbach, Marx distinguishes between «old materialism» and «new materialism». See Marx and Engels (1957: 72). Similarly, Engels (1966: 255) in his study of Ludwig Feurbach branded the whole of pre-Marxian materialism as «old materialism».

<sup>3</sup> For details see R. Bhattacharya (2010a), (2010d) and (2010c).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *AYVD*, v. 20; *SVM*, p. 129; Vācaspatimiśra, *Bhāmattī* on *BS* 3.3.53 (translated in Chatopadhyaya and Gangopadhyaya 1990: 242-243).

To most of the people materialism (some prefer to call it naturalism or physicalism) in India means the Cārvāka or what came to be known as its namesake, Lokāyata. Both the words are often used figuratively for materialism in general without, however, any ulterior motive, but as a matter of habit.<sup>5</sup> The origin of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata materialist system is thus traced back to hoary antiquity,<sup>6</sup> at the least to the first millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup>

There is enough evidence to prove that the Cārvāka/Lokāyata was not the only system of materialism in India. Even if we exclude the early inklings of materialist thought lurking in the *Rigveda*<sup>8</sup> and some of the Upaniṣads, and in the teachings of Ajita Kesakambala as found in the *Dighanikāya*, there are several indications of the existence of several pre-Cārvāka philosophical schools that were for all intents and purposes fundamentally materialistic, although there were some differences of opinion among them (stated in clear terms in the Tamil epic *Maṇimēkalai* 27.272-273, to which I shall soon revert) as there were different interpretations of certain *sūtras* among the Cārvākas themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the fact is that we do not come across the name of Cārvāka in the field of philosophy before the eighth century.<sup>10</sup> Three other words, *nāstika*, *lokāyata* and *bārhaspatya*, were already current to designate materialism although the same words, particularly *nāstika* and *lokāyata*, were also used in other senses too.<sup>11</sup> By the eighth century, however, all these words have become interchangeable in signification and so used in the works of several Buddhist, Jain and Brahminical authors such as Kamalaśīla,<sup>12</sup> Śīlānka,<sup>13</sup> Jayantabhaṭṭa<sup>14</sup> and others. Hemacandra (*AC* 3.526-527)

<sup>5</sup> Speaking of the adherents of a different school of materialists, Guṇaratna (*TRD*, p. 300) called them *cārvākaikadeśīyāḥ*, some sections of the Cārvākas. Sadānanda Yogīndra's *Vedāntasāra* (124-127; pp. 70-72) speaks of several Cārvākas professing *sthūlaśarīrātmaṇvāda*, *indriyātmaṇvāda*, *prāṇātmaṇvāda* and *ātmaṇvāda*, sections. Phanibhushana Tarkavagisa (1982: 69) endorses this view. More recently Johannes Bronkhorst (2007: 309) speaks of a materialist Cārvāka (not the demon) in the *Mbh*.

<sup>6</sup> P.L. Vaidya (1962: 703), in his edition of the *Rām.*, even goes to the extent of saying that «the tenets of Lokāyata school are as old as humanity itself!»

<sup>7</sup> Sen (2005: 23).

<sup>8</sup> See Del Toso (2012: 138-141).

<sup>9</sup> See Bhattacharya (2010a), (2010d) and (2010c).

<sup>10</sup> Jinendrabuddhi's *Viśālāmalavatī Pramāṇasamuccayaṭīkā*, p. 24: *atha vā cārvākaṃ pratyetaḍucyate*. For other references see note 11 below.

<sup>11</sup> Bhattacharya (2009a: 187-92), (2009b).

<sup>12</sup> See Haribhadra, *SDSam*, chapter 6. The chapter is devoted to the exposition of Lokāyata (*lokāyatā vadanty evam*, etc.; 80a), but in 85d we read: *cārvākāḥ pratipedire*. See also Kamalaśīla who, in his commentary *TSP* on *TS*, chapter 22, entitled *Lokāyataparīkṣā*, uses the names Cārvāka and Lokāyata interchangeably. See *TSP*, vol. 2, pp. 639, 649, 657, 663, 665, also 520 (*bārhaspatyādayaḥ*), 939 (*lokāyataḥ*) and 945 (*lokāyatam*).

<sup>13</sup> On *SKS* 1.1.1.6-8 (pp.10-11) and on 1.1.1.14 (p.15).

<sup>14</sup> *NM*, vol 1, pp. 9, 43, 154, 275, 387-388, etc.

records all the four words as synonymous in his lexicon. Names like *dehātma-vāda*, *indriyātma-vāda*, *mana-ātma-vāda*, *prāṇātma-vāda*,<sup>15</sup> etc. apparently refer to some pre-Cārvāka systems of philosophy, for these views are discussed separately, unconnected with the Cārvāka/Lokāyata.<sup>16</sup> Sāyaṇa-Mādhava, perhaps following Śaṅkara, mentions *dehātma-vāda* in *SDS*, chapter 1 (p. 6), to mean the Cārvākas.

It needs to be emphasized that materialism in India, however, did not begin with the Cārvāka/Lokāyata. On the other hand, it came as the culmination of a long history of heterodoxy and the attempt to see nature «just as it is, without alien addition».<sup>17</sup> There are several words in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit that bear evidence to the existence of materialist outlooks, if not of systems, before the Cārvākas. We shall take up two such words first.

### 1. *Nāstika*

The oldest word implying dissidence from the orthodox Brahminical view of the world is of course *nāstika*, the *Neinsager* (to use a convenient word once employed by Bertolt Brecht in his play *Der Jasager und der Neinsager*). The *KUp* (sometime after the fifth century BCE) is perhaps the first attempt to refute the heretical idea, namely, denial of the after-world, which characterized the idealists and the materialists in India.

The word *nāstikya*, like another such word *avaidika*, however occurs only once in the whole Upaniṣadic literature, and that too in a later text, *MUp* 3.5 and 7.10 respectively. We learn from Vāmana and Jayāditya, commentators of Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, that it is the existence of the after-world that is affirmed and denied by two sets of people; those who affirm are known as *āstikas*; those who deny, *nāstikas*.<sup>18</sup> This was the original meaning of these terms. Other meanings, such as the upholder and the

<sup>15</sup> In Śaṅkara's *BSB* on *BS* 1.1.1, we find the following expressions: *śarīram evāmeti viparyayo lokāyatikānām*; *indriyānyevāmetiṅdriyacaitanyavādīnām*; *manaścāitanyavādīnāmanā eveti*. *Vyom* (vol. 2, p. 126), *bhūta-cāitanyavādapaṅkṣa*. *NM* (vol. 2, p. 218), also *indriyacāitanyapaṅkṣa* (*Ibidem*), p. 219), yet another view which G. Sastri has called *manaścetenatvavāda* (*Ibidem*); Sureśvara's *Mānasollāsa-saṃgraha* 5.14-22; Yāmunā's *Siddhitraya*, pp. 19-24; Sadānanda Yogīndra's *Ve-dāntasāra*, pp. 70-72; Sadānanda Kāśmīraka's *Advaitvabrahmasiddhi*, chapter 2 (each chapter is called *mudgaraprahāra*), pp. 101-102.

<sup>16</sup> S. Radhakrishnan (1948 : 280) is of the opinion that what is common to all these views is that «the soul is only a natural phenomenon». Hiriyanna (1952: 26) thought that such views were variants of the Cārvākas (26).

<sup>17</sup> Engels (1966: 198).

<sup>18</sup> *Kāśikā* on *Aṣṭ* 4.4.60 (p. 396).

denigrator of the Veda,<sup>19</sup> the theist and the atheist (current in modern Indian languages such as Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, etc. even today), etc. came later.

The Jains explain the word somewhat differently: a *nāstika* is one who thinks that there is no virtue and vice, *nāsti puṇyaṃ pāpam iti matirasya nāstikaḥ*.<sup>20</sup> To this Malliṣeṇa adds the denial of the after-world<sup>21</sup> and Guṇaratna, the denial of the self: *te (scil. nāstikāḥ) ca jīvapuṇyapāpādikaṃ na manyante*.<sup>22</sup> The opposition is on ethical grounds rather than ontological.

Medhātithi in his commentary on the *Manu*, explains the word *nāstika* in two senses: a denier of the after-world (*paralokāpavādin*; on *Manu* 8.22) and as one who hold the view that the Vedic doctrines are false (*vedapramāṇākānām arthānām mithyāvādhyavasayaḥ*; on *Manu* 4.163). It may be pointed out that the first signification is directly connected with ontology (the view rejecting the existence of the extra-corporal and imperishable self distinguishes the materialists from the idealists) while the second is more relevant to the domain of epistemology (whether *śabda*, verbal testimony, is to be admitted as a valid instrument of cognition, and if so, if the Veda is to be admitted as the highest of such testimony). The materialists are to be called *nāstika* in the first sense only. In fact Buddhist and Jain savants join their voice in condemning the materialists as *nāstikas* whereas in the second sense the Buddhists and the Jains too are branded so. In both senses, however, the approbatory nature of the word is obvious. Like another such word, *pāśaṇḍin*, it is loaded with an attitude of censure and disapproval.

*Nāstika* is the commonest word to suggest irreligious attitude. Whether in the *Mbh* 12.36.43 or Vātsyāyana's commentary on *NS* 1.1.2, *nāstikya* is used in this sense.<sup>23</sup> But Vātsyāyana also employs the word to mean materialism (on *NS* 3.2.61). Similarly the *ṇāhiyavādī/natthiyavāī* in the Saṅghadāsagaṇi's *Vasudevahimḍī* (pp. 169, 275) and the *nāhiyavādī* in Haribhadra's *Samarāicca Kahā* (p. 164) is a materialist. Āryasūra's *Jātakamālā* 23.57 employs the work *nāstika* to suggest a materialist or a non-believer.

A passage from the *Vasudevahimḍī* (p. 275), a Prakrit work written in the third century, makes the position of some earlier *natthiyavāīs* (*nāstikavādins*) clear:

<sup>19</sup> A *nāstika* is the defiler of the Veda: *nāstiko vedanindakaḥ* (*Manu* 2.11).

<sup>20</sup> *AC* auto-commentary, p. 334.

<sup>21</sup> *SVM*, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> *TRD*, p. 300.

<sup>23</sup> See Bhattacharya (2009b: 227-231).

*jahā imdadhaṇu jahicchāē damsaṇīyaṃ uppajjati, puṇo vi jahicchāē pavinassaē; evaṃ na koī ettha sārabhūō atthi [\*na koī\*] jo sarīrapabheē i parabhavasamkāmī* (Emphasis added).

«As the rainbow is seen *accidentally* and disappears *accidentally* again, so is there no essence, [nothing] that goes through another birth to another body».

E. Frauwallner (1997, vol 2: 222) interprets a Cārvāka *sūtra* I.9, *jalabudbudavaj jīvāḥ*, «Souls are like water bubbles» (see Bhattacharya 2009: 79, 87) as a denial of the rigorous law of retribution following from the power of good and bad actions. This would make the Cārvāka/Lokāyatās appear as accidentalists (*yadrcchāvādins*). But E. Franco's (1997: 99) way of viewing the simile as an expression of epiphenomenalism, in my opinion, is more appropriate. The analogy has nothing to do with necessity and accident.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. *Bhūtavāda*

The presence of several groups of pre-Cārvāka materialists is testified by an old Jain canonical work, the *SKS* (1.1.1-20, 2.1.15-16). Śīlāṅka (ninth century) in his commentary on the *SKS* employs the word *bhūtavādin* along with Bārhaspatya, Cārvāka and Lokāyatika (on *SKS* 1.1. 6-8, pp.10-11). He identifies *egesā* (in Sanskrit *ekeṣām*) with the *bhūtavādins* and calls them «followers of the doctrine of Bṛhaspati» (on *SKS* 1.1.7-8). He uses another synonym, *tajjīvataccharīravādin* (on *SKS* 1.1.11-14; pp. 13-14), «one who holds that the spirit and the body are identical» as well as *nāstika* (on *SKS* 1.1.14; p.15). The *SKS* also refers to several other presumably materialist schools that mostly spoke of *five* elements (1.1.7-8, 15, 20-25) instead of *four* (which the Cārvākas did). Śīlāṅka apparently did not attach any importance to *bhūtacatuṣṭayavāda* (four-elements doctrine) of the Cārvākas and identified even the *bhūtapañcakavādins* (mentioned in *SKS* 1.1.7)<sup>25</sup> at first with the Cārvākas and then as *bhūtavādins* and Bārhaspatyas! Śīlāṅka's identification of many of the opponents of the Jain creed, however, is not always convincing. In his comments on the same text (on *SKS* 2.1.20) he himself is uncertain about the identity of «the second man» and

<sup>24</sup> It may be noted in this connection that the same simile was used in the *SKS* to uphold the idealist view (1.2.1.26): «As for instance, a water-bubble is produced in water, grows in water, is not separate from water, but is bound up in water: so all beings have the Self for their cause and their object, they are produced by the Self, they are intimately connected with the Self, they are bound up in the Self».

<sup>25</sup> *saṅti pañca mahabbhūyā ihamege simāhiyā | pudhavī āu teu vā vāu āgāsapamcamā ||* («Some profess [the exclusive belief in] the five gross elements: earth, water, fire, air and space»). *Mbh* 12.267.4 also mentions «five great elements» (*mahābhūtāni pañcetī*) in relation to a similar, if not the same, doctrine.

proposes two alternatives: either the Laukāyitakas or the Sāṃkhyas. He uses all the names of materialists current in his time – Cārvāka, *nāstika*, Bārhaspatya, *bhūtavādin* (also *pañcabhūtavādyādyāḥ* and more elaborately as *pañcabhūtāstītvādivādīnaḥ* (on *SKS* 1.1.20-25; p. 19), and Laukāyatikas (besides *tajjīvataccharīravādīns*) – interchangeably, as many others such as Kamalaśīla and Jayantabhaṭṭa do (see above).

We do not know whether materialism appeared in south India (as recorded in *Maṇimēkalai*, composed between the third and the seventh century CE) quite independent of the developments in the north. Whatever the case may be, there can be little doubt that materialism in course of time gained adherents even in faraway Kashmir.<sup>26</sup> In or around the eighth century one such school came to be known as the Cārvāka. Partial acceptance of the validity of inference was their hallmark. They distinguished themselves from the *bhūtavādīns* and other earlier materialists by declaring their view regarding inference in no uncertain terms. Yet a host of their opponents, whether they were Brahminical, Buddhist or Jain, continued to criticize them for not admitting inference at all as an instrument of cognition.

Who are the *bhūtavādīns*? In the list of rival claimants for the first cause (*jagatkāraṇa*) given in the *ŚvUp* 1.2, *bhūtāni* (the elements), along with time, *svabhāva* (own nature), *niyati* (destiny) and others are mentioned. There is no way to prove that *bhūtavāda* was a direct descendent of the doctrine of *bhūtāni*. We first read of the *bhūtavādīns* in the *Maṇimēkalai* who in many respects resemble the *lokāyatikas*. The *bhūtavādin*, however, says that on doctrinal points they have some differences with the Lokāyatās. This Tamil epic does not mention the Cārvākas, but does refer to the Lokāyatās. A *bhūtavādin* is made to declare the basic doctrine of the system he adheres to in the following terms (27.265-76; p. 154):

When *aathi* (?) flowers, sugar and the rest  
Are mixed, wine is made. Life too appears  
By the mixing of elements, vanishes  
When they separate as sounds from a drum.  
Conscious elements produce life within  
And unconscious one produces the body  
Each appearing through their elements.  
This is the truth. Words different from this  
And other facts are from Materialists [Lokāyatās].  
Sense perception is valid. Inference  
Is false. This birth and its effect conclude

<sup>26</sup> Udbhaṭṭa, who composed a rather unusual commentary on the *Cārvākasūtra* (now lost), was a Kashmirian as was his arch opponent, Jayanta, author of the *NM*.

Now. Talk of other birth is falsity.<sup>27</sup>

The words of the *bhūtavādin* have been paraphrased by a late medieval commentator in the following way:

When certain flowers and jaggery are boiled together, liquor is born which produced intoxication. Just as when elements combine, consciousness arises. Consciousness dissolves with the dissolutions of the elements composing them like the disintegration of sound. Elements combine to produce living *bhūtas* and from them other living *bhūtas* will be born. Life and consciousness are synonymous. From non-living *bhūtas* consisting of two or more elements rise non-living *bhūtas* of the same type. Lokāyata is a variant of this system that agrees in fundamental with this system. Observation is the method by knowledge is obtained. Inferential thinking is illusion. This worldly life is real. Its effect is experienced in this life only. The theory that we enjoy the fruits of our action in our next birth or in another world is false.<sup>28</sup>

So far as the *Maṇimēkalai* is concerned, the number of elements admitted by the *bhūtavādins* is not specified; hence there is no way of ascertaining whether the *bhūtavādins* spoke of five or four elements. The first statement regarding the rise of consciousness is very much similar to the Cārvāka aphorism: «As the power of intoxication (arises or is manifested) from the constituent parts of the wine (such as flour, water and molasses)». <sup>29</sup> The rejection of rebirth is a basic materialist position which can be traced back to much earlier sources.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In another translation (or rather a prose adaptation), the distinction between the *bhūtavādins* and the *laukīyatikas* is somewhat differently explained: «The *Bhūta-vādīs* hold that the world is formed out of the five elements alone, without any divine intervention. We agree with the Lokāyata, the sage said, and believe that when the elements combined together, a material and a spirit come into existence. That is all. We believe that perception alone is our means of knowledge and nothing else. We recognise only one birth and we know that our joys and pains end on earth with this one life» (Holmstör, 1996: 170).

<sup>28</sup> This paraphrase has been translated into English by N. Vanamamalai (1973: 36). The commentator further says (*Ibidem*) that there were three such schools: Bhūtavāda, Lokāyata and Sarvaka (meaning Cārvāka?). If so, the commentator must have flourished after the eighth century, for the name, Cārvāka, as has been said before, does not occur in the context of philosophy before then.

<sup>29</sup> See Bhattacharya (2009b: 79, 87; fragment I.5).

<sup>30</sup> The *KUp*, as said before, is perhaps the first attempt to refute the heretical idea, namely, denial of the after-world. There is, however, no reference to hell in the *KUp* (as Whitney, 1890: 92) so perceptively noted); the deniers of the after-world are forced to repeated redeath and subsequent rebirth on earth. It is in *Mbh* 12.146.18 that we read of the abode of Yama (*yamakṣaya*) where the messengers of Yama (*yamadūtas*) bring back the deniers of the other-world; such sinners have to stay there for a while before they are sent back to earth. The elaborate picture of hell with its eighty four pits (*kuṇḍas*) developed later, mainly in the Purāṇas.

The *bhūtavādin* in the Tamil epic, however, rejects inference as such, declaring it to be false. On the other hand, the Cārvākas, as it has been pointed out time and again,<sup>31</sup> do admit inference in all worldly affairs.

### 3. *The Old and the New Materialists: Points of Difference*

In view of all this the new materialists (Cārvākas) may be distinguished from the old materialists of all sorts in the following respects:

a) Instead of five elements (including *ākāśa* or *vyoma*, space) as their principle (*tattva*), the Cārvākas spoke of four, excluding space,<sup>32</sup> presumably because it was not amenable to sense-perception.

b) The *bhūtavādins* believed in two kinds of matter: lifeless and living. Life originates from living matter, the body from the lifeless. The Cārvāka/Lokāyatās did not believe in such duality; to them all beings/entities were made of the same four basic elements.<sup>33</sup>

c) There was another domain in which the two differed more radically. Some of the Pre-Cārvāka materialists were accidentalists (*yadṛcchāvādins*); they did not believe in causality. On the other hand, the Cārvākas appear to have endorsed causality;<sup>34</sup> they adopted the doctrine of *svabhāva*-as-causality rather than the opposite one, namely, *svabhāva*-as-accident.<sup>35</sup>

d) The Cārvākas admitted the validity of inference insofar as it was confined to the material and perceptible world (hence verifiable), not extended to the invisible and unverifiable areas, such as the imperishable soul, god, omniscient persons (admitted by the Buddhists and the Jains as well), the outcome of performing sacrifices called *apūrva* (as claimed by the Mīmāṃsakas), etc.,<sup>36</sup> while some of the old materialists rejected inference as such as an instrument of cognition, and clung to perception alone.

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<sup>32</sup> Bhattacharya (2009b: 78, 86; aphorism I.2).

<sup>33</sup> Bhattacharya (*Ibidem*: 78-79, 86; aphorisms I.1-3).

<sup>34</sup> See *SDS*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> For a study of the doctrine of *svabhāva*, see Bhattacharya (2012).

<sup>36</sup> For sources see Bhattacharya (2009: 57-58) and (2010b: 28-30).

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BSB = Śaṅkara, *Bharmasūtrabhāṣya* (see BS).

EPU = *Eighteen Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. by V.P. Limaye and R.D. Vadekar, Vaidika Samśodhana Mandala, Poona 1958.

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KUP = *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (see EUP).

Manu = *Manusmṛti*:

*Manu-Smṛti, With Nine Commentaries by Medhātithi, Sarvajnanārāyaṇa, Kullūka, Rāghavānanda, Nandana, Rāmacandra, Maṇirāma, Govindarāja, and Bhāruci* (6 vols.), ed. by J.H. Dave, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1972-84.

MBh = *Mahābhārata*:

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MUP = *Maitrī (or Maitrāyaṇī or Maitrāyaṇīya) Upaniṣad* (see EPU).

NM = Jayantabhaṭṭa, *Nyāyamañjarī*:

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- ṢDSam = Haribhadra, *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya*:  
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- TRD = Guṇaratna, *Tarkarahasyadīpikā*:  
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