

Vulnerable Ecologies: A Literary Study of Select Hydronarratives in India

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Abstract

The optics of this paper is a close analysis of various literary narratives on hydropower projects like canals and dams in India with a focus on vulnerability. Vulnerability Studies, in its essence, is multidisciplinary in nature and the various debates in this field of enquiry try to negotiate the weaknesses of communities and various systems as well as their interactions with vulnerable situations and contexts. Individuals and communities that are susceptible to vulnerabilities of varying kinds have been undergoing oppression, violence and abuse in various cultural contexts. This proposal contends to study such communities, individuals and systems that come under the rubric of ecological vulnerability through water-related developmental projects like dams, canals, etc, in India. Hydronarratives like Dweepa by Na. D'Souza and Akkineni Kutumbarao's Softly Dies a Lake will be closely analysed in this paper to renegotiate the existing victimological rhetoric found in these narratives. Furthermore, this paper will reassess the context of ecological vulnerability through a process of 'geomediation'.

Keywords: vulnerability, water, resources, ecology, geomediation, hydronarratives

The Vulnerability Studies Network at the University of Leicester proposes vulnerability as a research method for literary and cultural studies. Ecological vulnerability is a concept that has gained increasing attention in the scientific community, particularly in relation to developmental projects and their impact on the environment. There is a growing body of research which is focused on understanding the vulnerability of ecosystems and communities in response to developmental projects. Such studies also closely monitor the resulting environmental changes and their potential impact on natural systems. Developmental projects, such as infrastructure development, urban expansion and industrialisation, have the potential

to disrupt and degrade ecosystems, leading to a greater vulnerability of these ecosystems to environmental changes and disturbances. It includes the potential impact of floods, hurricanes and other extreme weather events that can be intensified by climate change and their effects on agricultural production and human life. These developmental projects pose significant challenges for the sustainability and resilience of ecosystems, as they can alter the physical environment, introduce new species, change land use patterns, and disrupt ecological processes. Additionally, ecological vulnerability also encompasses economic and social vulnerability, thereby highlighting the risks and uncertainties that arise from changes in the economic and social environment.

Existing scholarship on the various human interventions in the Anthropocene epoch argues that developmental projects are mostly invested in an extractive relationship with nature, which leverages on the immense materiality of geological processes for managing the production and consumption patterns of human species. The bathetic quality of this extractive dependence on nature is the ‘geopolitical wreckage and ecological devastation’ (‘Geomediations’ 2017) in which the Anthropocene is entrenched at present. Daniel Klingensmith’s *One Valley and a Thousand* (2007) demonstrates how policies of development can result in vulnerable mediations. His work studies the socio-political challenges posed by nationalism, liberal colonialism and post-war liberal modernism in connection with dams and irrigation projects. Arun Kumar Nayak’s *Dams and Developments in India* (2016) argues that dam projects are linked to the political economy of decolonisation and nationalism rather than development. This dispensation within the discourse of developmental projects locates development as a curse to human imagination because it echoes the existing forces of social hierarchies and power structures.

In this context, my study focuses on select hydronarratives, namely *Dweepa* (2013) by Na.

D'Souza and Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020). This paper reads the representation of ecological precarity and human vulnerability through the human-hydro intimacies found in these narratives. Within this context of ecological precarity and geopolitical logics, it is very often vulnerable individuals and communities who are at the receiving end of the devastating effects of developmental projects. Therefore, the paradigmatic metaphor of development-induced-displacement is mostly victimological in nature. This study focusses on the victimological position of displaced communities and proposes to reassess the context of ecological vulnerability through a process of human disentanglement with nature. Moreover, these narratives resound the familiar vectors of violence against nature, abuse of natural resources, gender oppression, and traumatic memories. And in the middle of this interplay, there emerges a geo-mediated alternative form of intimacy which, as the paper proposes, is inadvertently recuperative and regenerative in spirit and not necessarily victimological.

Instead of promising mastery over nature, these twenty-first century geologic mediations signal humanity's impoverished status as denizens of the world of catastrophically diminishing resources, the inevitability of mass extinctions, and the incalculability of the effects of human actions. And yet, these fictions of the geologic turn also allow us to imagine new ways of experiencing the planet, our bodies, and our grief. To use Elisabeth Grosz's words, they 'bring about sensations, not sensations of what we know and recognize, but of what is unknown, unexperienced, traces not of the past but of the future, not of the human and its recognized features, but of the inhuman'. (Ivanchikova 2018: 8)

In the Introduction to *Dweepa* it is mentioned that Na. D'Souza is known as a 'submersion writer' in Kannada literary circles owing to the literary pieces he has written with the central theme of development-based-destruction and displacement. *Dweepa* (Island) was originally published in 1978 and the English translation came out in 2013. Apart from this work, D'Souza

has written *Mulugade* (Submersion 1984), *Oddu* (Barricade 1990) and several other short stories that dealt with the insensitive effects of developmental projects. All these works provide a nuanced interface to families and communities that have suffered from the construction of dams, exploitation of human resources and discrediting of the victims of displacement. *Dweepa* brings in an insider's perspective of having to live under the constant fear of being isolated geographically. The novella unfolds the tragedy that is awaiting a family, in fact the only family that was left behind with the rising water levels at Sharavathi river. The indefiniteness within the family of Ganapayya and Nagaveni as they try to put their lives together in the face of an imminent submergence is interspersed with personal desires and conflicts. Sangita Patil has read the novella for its 'woman's affinity and concern for nature' (Patil 2019: 106). Departing from this eco-feminist stance on the text, this paper focuses on its vulnerable ecologies and how they foreground an alternative human-hydro intimacy to accomplish a recuperative narrative about human entanglements with nature.

Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020) is the English translation of his Telugu novel, *Kolleti Jaadalu*. The novel expounds the story of lake Kolleru through the eyes of a free-spirited young child. The deeply entangled life of the young narrator with the people of Kolleru, the ebb and flow of lives at Kolleru and the affective interconnections with all biotic and abiotic forms in this village makes this novel an eco-memoir. The translator Vasanth Kannabiran opines, '*Kolleti Jaadalu* is not just another novel—it is memory, history, tribute, grief, apology, and penance. It traces the victory and defeat of human endeavour, and the triumph of money and the market' (Kutumbarao 2020: xix). The precarious lives of people who are in a constant struggle to survive in hostile environment and the unpredictable petulance of nature are the major counterparts of this eco-memoir that capture the vignettes of this hamlet in Andhra Pradesh. The predominant readings of this novel locate it within the interstices of development,

modernisation, and environmental deterioration. However, this paper proposes to build a case for 'geomediation', a move from the existing extractive relationship with nature to a more fundamental longing and regeneration through nature.

Ecological Precarity, Vulnerable Selves and Hydronarratives

Rakesh Krishnan's article, 'The "Long March" of Migrant Laborers in India: Cities and Moral Outrage' analyses a familiar metaphor of development: the lamp and shadow analogy which essentially suggests that developmental projects will undoubtedly spread light. However, it also casts a shadow right beneath the light which is unfortunately the space occupied by the hapless victims of developmental projects. Krishnan adds:

The statement highlights the complexity of the process of development wherein the visibility of the project and its benefits occlude the losers of such projects. It is a gentle and firm reminder that one should not collapse development projects as developments per se. Lack of empathy towards the people, those who occupy the shadows when the lights of development glow are making the process of economic growth devoid of a soul. People or human-centric development seems to be beyond the logic of capital and market. So, it is quintessential to place people back in the drawing boards. The demand is to cultivate a disposition or a political morality that can blend technocratic visions of the society with people-centric development. (Krishnan 2020: 7)

In the light of this analogy, the vulnerable communities depicted in both the texts, *Dweepa* and *Softly Dies a Lake* are reminders of ecological precarity. The narratives expound families and individuals who are marginalised to the shadows that are cast by the light of developmental projects. The presence of an emic perspective in both the narratives is an additional feature which establishes a certain creative liberation of the author's personal experience with these

hydroscapes.

The novella *Dweepa* is divided into seven segments, each named after the stars that influence the different phases of monsoon, namely *Krithika*, *Rohini*, *Mrigashira*, *Aridhara*, *Punarvasu*, *Pushya*, and *Aslesha*. D'Souza seamlessly captures the temperament of nature through these seven segments and the social anguish of the families are encapsulated by the waters of Sharavathi river. The foregrounding performed by water marks the geological entanglement of this narrative.

It reflects the changing mood of the protagonists, sometimes threatening and at other times protective. The river's eternal companion, rain, also plays a significant role. The chapters are named after stars that influence the different phases of the monsoon, each suggesting a different mood and behaviour of the rains corresponding to the changes that happen in quick succession in the lives of the three individuals that inhabit the novella. Thus, nature, both as an external presence and an internal force, shapes the structure of the novella, pushing it to its final resolution. (D'Souza 2013: xxvii)

Na. D'Souza was closely associated with the Sharavathi hydroelectric project for about twenty-five years. His first-hand knowledge and experience of how Linganamakki Dam came into existence has been translated as the storyline of this narrative. The apathy of bureaucracy, marginalisation of the displaced victims, deepening of Sharavathi river, uprooting of hapless village folk from their familiar ecosystem, opaque procedures with the compensation money, crafty government officials, Nehruvian model of modernisation, neo-liberal policies, communal violence, untouchability, and an ever-creative fury of nature foreground the multiple precarities that are pivotal to the narrative. 'Sharavathi might swallow the Hosamane Parvatha this monsoon' (D'Souza 2013: 2); thus begins the Introduction with the rage of the river in the

novella where readers are made to understand that only three families among five have inhabited patches of land near the foothill and they have struggled to survive against the rising water levels of Sharavathi. The other two families were bonded labourers and hence tied to their landlords for life. Although there is a suggestion that one of the landlords Ganapayya may not be as economically well off as the other two landlords—Herambha Hegde and Parameshwarayya, it is also indicated that they lived as equals as their status was determined by their position in the community and not merely on wealth.

Ganapayya was neither rich nor poor. All he had were two acres of wetland for an areca farm and three acres of agricultural land to grow rice. He did not own farm hands, he hired some for wages. But that did not make any difference to his status. The respect the landlords commanded came from their place and role in the community, not from their wealth. This had been the system in the Malenadu villages for generations. (D'Souza 2013: 1)

The first sign of unsettlement and conflict is encountered in the narrative when the dam becomes a reason to obstruct the natural bonding that existed among the landlords. The two wealthy landlords managed to bribe the officials and get their compensation: Parameshwaryya, got land near Sagara and the Herambha got land in Ananthapura. Ganapayya who could not afford to bribe was left behind to face the consequences of submersion. Therefore, the inferiority, rage and self-doubt that Ganapayya experienced is a corollary of several socio-cultural vectors that have been controlling and stifling his experiences in general. His sense of dilemma traps him even further so much so that it affects his personal relationship with Nagaveni, his wife. It takes a different trajectory with the arrival of Krishnayya. The dam continues to be the external force which is physically disabling and emotionally violating the existence of the three main characters. The complexities of human life and inner turmoil are

caricatured poignantly by D'Souza by superimposing them on the rising water level. As the rains continue, the readers are introduced to avoidable loss of certain belief systems and the inexorable modality of negotiating with new modes of being. As for Ganapayya:

He sat with his head in his hands. He was weighed down with worries he could not handle. He had never felt so helpless ever before. His spirit trembled every time it struck him afresh that they were not in touch with the world outside. The water in the river had to subside someday, if not today or tomorrow. (D'Souza 2013: 50)

The fissures within the relationship of the three main characters worsen when desire overcame their thought and all that was left was the incessant rain which might submerge the unshakeable Sita Parvatha too. The psychological dilemma of the characters was closely entrenched on nature.

Krishnayya could not laugh his hearty laugh or eat a wholesome meal or sleep to forget his troubles. He could not open his heart to anyone, could not trust anyone, could not embrace anyone as his own. The householder, Ganapayya, could be feeling the same way. Nagaveni too. Each of them felt shackled to a log and forced to carry it on their heads. Krishnayya winced as if a thorn, embedded in his heel, hurt when least expected. Life had become distasteful. (D'Souza 2013: 83)

The dam in *Dweepa* constitutes as a signifier of an evil force which is entangled in a nexus between the various exigencies that threatened their livelihood and intimate human relations. The ecological vulnerability of Hosamane village is compounded by the absence of a support system for the characters and a growing distrust among them, which was further paving way to their emotional vulnerability. The hydroscape of Sharavathi thereby bore witness to the distressing predicament of the characters, highlighting a victimological rhetoric of the

narrative. Incidentally, Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* also constantly impinges upon the past glory of lake Kolleru and the precarity of the silent victims of the present-day Kolleru.

In its Preface, the author declares, 'this novel is about my childhood. All the people in it are real. That village is real. Kolleru is real' (Kutumbarao 2020: xxii). Consequently, like *Dweepa*, this novel can be read as an ecological narrative written with an emic perspective of this lake village—a Kolleru which is caught between the interstices of his childhood memory and the Kolleru which has been destroyed in the battle of progress, development and modernisation. *Softly Dies a Lake* is an elegy written to a freshwater lake in Andhra Pradesh. Srinivasa Rao is visiting Kolleru after a gap of fifty years and he could not hold his disbelief by seeing the lake in the present day. The major chunk of the novel is narrated through the perspective of young Srinivasa, lovingly called by everyone as Seenu.

The lake which should have stretched out boundlessly before his eyes lay in tattered strips. Kolleru, once dense with plants and creepers and flowers, lay bare before him like shards of shattered glass. Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone? Like a map of the world divided wantonly by crooked boundaries Kolleru was split by bunds. Broken bunds. (Kutumbarao 2020: 1)

The idyllic, pastoral setting of Kolleru also suggested a peaceful description of the village life. The village had two castes—the Kammas who were the farmers and the Vaddis who were the fisherfolk. Apart from them, there was a migrant Muslim tailor. The village was a mix of poor and rich people and their community identity was strongly tethered through marriage and family. We read that the entire village was related to each other one way or the other. Seenu

grew up close to nature and by finding his bearing in nature's pristine elements until Jhansi convinces him to get educated and to move out of the village. When an unexpected rainfall submerges Kolleru, the village folk loses an entire year's harvest. However, to mitigate the losses, the villagers come up with a plan of collective farming. Even though it sounded unreal in the beginning, a disciplined and united community came together to farm on more than 500 acres. Around 300 men and their families lined up and took turns to build a ridge which was 4 feet high around the 500 acres, pumped water out, ploughed, cultivated, and guarded the ridge to ensure that there are no cracks made by crabs or any fish. It took them several months to complete the collective farming exercise.

They turned on Kolleru herself. Not like humans but like demons. Like the ocean of milk that was churned by the Devas and Asuras who held on to Adishesha's tail and fought flames of poison in quest of the eternal *amrita*, they churned the Kolleru in rebellion to produce nectar. (Kutumbarao 2020: 173)

The collective farming continued for two more years, where the Kammas and Vaddis reaped a golden harvest. When groups and differences among people took the better of them, the village was split. With the floods that followed, there were no more cultivation and harvest except for the looming starvation at Kolleru. In the following years, the water from Kolleru became unfit for drinking because all kinds of industrial waste, fish food, pesticides, and other inorganic manure reached Kolleru through the Krishna canal. The treacherous government and the crafty politicians never wanted to protect the wetland and they made policies to retract more than 55 acres of Kolleru so that they can be used for their vested interests.

The varying degrees of abuse of nature will undoubtedly prompt responses from it that are both intricate and consequential. Nature responds through a series of feedback loops and

mechanisms which are rather attempts to adapt and restore balance in its face of tumultuous disruptions. In this section, this paper has proposed the cases of the hydroscaapes Sharavathi and Kolleru, where the prominent rhetoric is victimological in nature. The study will progress by proposing alternative modalities that are suggestive of geo-mediated intimacies that are entangled in a human-nature network.

The relationality of ecological precarity and its embeddedness in vulnerable human selves in both the narratives highlight the centrality of Anthropogenic climate change. In *Dweepa*, the obstruction of Sharavathi river to construct Linganamakki Dam is alternatively a violence committed on nature and its equilibrium. Hence it is bound to result in counter-violence. As the narrative suggested, the dam submerged an entire village thereby drowning long-held belief systems and values. Metaphorically, the dam became an evil force that lacerated their very own existence, livelihood and ecosystem. The construction of the dam could even bring out wild animals to human habitation as humans invaded their habitats. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the counter-violence of nature has been in the form of floods, tattered strips of land that cannot be used for cultivation and a filthy pond which was the breeding ground for germs and toxic waste.

Nature, otherwise benevolent, can also reciprocate with fury when disturbed by damming. The symbolic significance of the rising water, engulfing the mythical hillock, is too hard to miss. The overbearing physical reality that surrounds and threatens their lives thus functions as a trope suggestive of their inner turmoil. *Dweepa* is as much a state of mind as it is of the outside nature. (D'Souza 2013: xx)

For the generations to come the destruction of Kolleru will be one of the catastrophes of history. A human error that impoverished their lives immeasurably. Made it unliveable (Kutumbarao 2020: 197).

Hydrographic Imaginary and a Transition from Extraction to Mediation

Alla Ivanchikova proposes the term geomeditation, ‘to capture the way in which the geologic matter mediates and serves as a vector of recuperation and recovery’ (Ivanchikova 2018: 7). The hydrographic imaginary in both the narratives discussed here proposes an alternative geological intimacy and mediation. The human condition and their experience which can be called as the ‘bios’ is at the centre of *Dweepa* and *Softly Dies a Lake*. Whereas, the non-human entity which is the hydroscape or the ‘geos’—Kolleru and Sharavathi frame and encapsulate the human experience. In other words, the geos and the bios are entangled in a complex matrix and by extension, these narratives can be perceived to be biopolitical in its content.

However, the ongoing extractive relationship between the bios and the geos is quite distant from the geomeditation which is proposed by Alla Ivanchikova. The extractive relationship between them is exploitative on nature and on all its elements; whereas, it is traumatic to all other living species. Kolleru submerged most of the arable land and they lost their year’s harvest.

When the flood came it just grew worse and worse but never went down. The people had to fight the flood and battle for their lives. Along with the loss of harvest there was also the loss of livestock and lives. Whatever was lost one had to salvage what was left ... the flood brought not only water but all kinds of rubbish as well. Now and then swollen human corpses, carcasses of cattle, chickens and pigs were washed in. The whole village and all the houses were full of water and filthy with foul-smelling rubbish. (Kutumbarao 2020: 51)

The Kolleru that had set people quaking for four days began to recede on the fifth. If it

had not gone down that day the village would have had to be evacuated. Those who had built walls with mud had to build new walls again ... This year's harvest had gone completely to Kolleru. (Kutumbarao 2020: 54)

In *Dweepa*, the vitality of Sharavathi made the characters grapple with their own insignificance. The construction of the dam ended up dismantling the lives of people who were least connected with the developmental project. The eventual flooding and incessant rain took the better of them.

The Sharavathi was swelling by the moment ... water had encircled Sita Parvatha. From a distance, Hosamanehalli looked like an island, like an insignificant rock in the sea, a helpless piece of land surrounded by a watery girdle with no contact with the outside world whatsoever. (D'Souza 2013: 48)

The Anthropocene debates that pin down the role of culture and civilisation as agents in mediating the irreversible transformation of our biosphere (even on a planetary level) is well captured in the making of these narratives. The fact that environmental degradation is accelerated through human intervention is identified and acknowledged in them. Simultaneously, the extractive relationship between the bios and the geos in Kolleru and Sharavathi and the succeeding mayhem captured in these narratives do offer a space and context for geomediation.

The plausible solution in this context emerges from a hydrographic imaginary which is suggestive of a transition from an extractive position to a mediatory role. By practising collective farming, people in Kolleru attempted to co-exist with all living and non-living beings. As one of the characters in *Softly Dies a Lake*, Rangayya says, 'to cleanse ourselves of our sins' (Kutumbarao 2020: 180). The whole village was excited and joyful when the field

was ready for harvest after their exercise of collective farming. It can be perceived as an attempt towards re-entanglement, engaging the bios and the geos together underscoring strong threads of co-existence. With collective farming, Kolleru reaped the best harvest in years, the fish from Kolleru was nutritious and tasted different, and more importantly, the field was full of dragonflies which, according to popular belief, highlighted a bountiful harvest. Here, Kolleru or the same old hydroscape mediated pure joy and bliss of the villagers as opposed to the then recent catastrophe that they experienced.

And in *Dweepa*, there is a hint about the possibility to treat nature and their own personal intimacies differently. As Ivanchikova wonders, ‘I am intrigued by the mediatic in the geologic—the capacity of the earth and the soil to be media, to mediate traumatic histories, to forge new vectors of transformation and becoming for humans’ (Ivanchikova 2018: 7). Here, Sharavathi mediates a certain catharsis to the individuals. This hydroscape can be therefore identified as a medium to come in terms with traumatic memories and histories.

Krishnayya would have gone home if only the water around Hosamane had subsided, if only there was no wild animals on the prowl around the house. He stayed on mainly for Nagaveni’s sake, for whatever pleasure she got out of his presence. He stayed even though he felt his friendship with her might jeopardise her family life. The water surrounding Hosamanehalli did not sink, the fury of the wind did not abate. The Aslesha rain fell day and night. (D’Souza 2013: 84)

The hydrographic imaginary in these narratives addressed a symbolic site where water has acted as a vector for regeneration and recuperation. A regeneration for the residents of Kolleru as they received a second chance to flourish and reap a golden harvest after the flooding of Kolleru in the recent past. Similarly, for the last-standing family near Sharavathi, the water was

recuperative and therapeutic as the characters were able to come in terms with their innermost desires. Nagaveni ruminates and acts upon her words, ‘Krishna, I’ve attained moksha. I’m ready to drown in the Sharavathi tomorrow. Today, I’ve got what I wanted ... I’ve attained bliss. My desire has been fulfilled’ (D’Souza 2013: 86–87). The paper has therefore offered a critique of the predominant victimological rhetoric of ecological narratives and has proposed geo-mediated human-hydro intimacies that echo regeneration and recuperation.

Conclusion: Mediations of Geologic Memoryscapes

To conclude, it is also relevant to perceive that beyond the possibilities of geological mediation and extraction as discussed in the previous section, the idea of a luscious Kolleru and a majestic Sharavathi exist only in/as memories in the present; in a very atomic, mineralogical stage. In the present, there is no tangible experience of its existence. How much ever true and real they have been in the past, the truth of it is only limited to one’s individual memories at present. This understanding has a foreboding quality to it as it reminds humanity that they are nothing but clusters of atoms who will die, decay and will exist as memories in a mineralogical stage.

Alla Ivanchikova’s proposal on geomeditation suggests, ‘geologic matter mediates access to deep memory (planetary history recorded through the work of sedimentation) ... It is generative of experiences, forms, and flows as well as expressive of them’ (Ivanchikova 2018: 7). This mediation by memories can be further elaborated with her analysis of deep time, which signifies a correlation between the bios and the geos. It studies evolutionary theory in tandem with geological epochs. This, in turn, has shaped newer imaginaries about how geologic matter and allied activities like excavation, mining, etc. can demonstrate imprints of ancient history. Therefore, the subterranean memories are crucial to our understanding of nature’s ultimate

repository of origins.

More importantly, geomediation facilitate geologic memoryscapes with the attribution of new forms of intimacy and conviviality. Or according to Alla, ‘to a recognition of indebtedness of life to nonlife, and to a cross-pollination that cuts across ontological categories’ (Ivanchikova 2018: 7). The emerging memoryscapes can predicate a new vocabulary for trauma, where traumatic memories could find solace in the most unexpected spaces like geologic matter. The narratives have demonstrated that unsustainable human desires (physical, social, political, economic, cultural, etc) will get washed down as sediments which can further lead to a massive reorientation of structures and systems and that will be a precursor to the re-entanglement of the bios and the geos. To recount environmentalist Vandana Shiva:

The future depends on our oneness as humanity on one planet, connected through biodiversity and health. Let us not allow the cautions of today to be cemented into a permanent climate of fear and isolation. We need each other and the earth, in our rich diversity and self-organisation, to create resilience in times of emergency, and to regenerate health and well-being in the post-corona world. This crisis has created a new opportunity to effect a paradigm shift from the mechanistic, industrial age of separation, domination, greed, and disease, to the age of Gaia, of a planetary civilisation based on the consciousness that we are one earth family, that our health is one health rooted in ecological interconnectedness, diversity, regeneration, and harmony. (Shiva 2022: 244)

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