

Alienation, Utopia and Exclusion: Third World-ism Portrayed in the play *Bhoma* by Badal Sircar

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1.0 Introduction

Mass communication scholars define theatre as a direct mode of communication that resonates in the pulse of its audiences. Modern Social Media is plagued by a strange dichotomy- it brings the world together and diffuses the theory of space and time, and on the other hand, it also creates an island of loneliness, where each individual detaches himself from the world and delves into a virtual realm of his own. In this perspective modern theatre both in the East and the West are trying to communicate various issues to its audiences one to one-. Termed as “*intimate Theatre*” by many, it was Badal Sircar who in 1958 first gave it a name *Angan mancha*. With a forced detachment from the babu culture and the Proscenium as a mode of entertainment of the elite, Badal Sircar brought theatre to the masses, in an open air environment. Many post-colonial theatre doyens during his time like Habib Tanveer, Azim Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad had already meddled in theatre of the masses. In fact, just before Sircar, the IPTA also experimented with open air performances. However the storyline required them to be in the Proscenium. Noted artistes like Kamladevi Chattopadhaya’s ‘Indian National Theatre’, Utpal Dutt’s ‘Little Theatre Group’ and Thoppil Bhasi’s ‘*Kerala People’s Art Club*’. All of them followed the pattern of the proscenium arch theatre.

The concept of *Mukta mancha* provided the essential bridge between the audience and the actors, who could communicate with each other during the play. This shrinking of space created a new language in theatre communication, where spectators were recreated. In this journey of depicting Third World characters, Sircar was greatly influenced by “*Apocalypsis cum Figuris*”, directed by Jerzy Grotowski, which was based on Poor Theatre- “*By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actorspectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. It challenges the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines- literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting (under the direction of a metteur-en-scene).*

This “synthetic theatre” is the contemporary theatre, which we readily call the “Rich Theatre”—rich in flaws. (Grotowski)

Badal Sircar fused the elements of folklore and dancing in his theatrical form. He experimented with the seating arrangement of his *Muktamancha* to suit the needs of his plays. This created the maximisation of “*actor spectator relationship*” according to him. In Anganmancha performances, he removed the chairs and replaced them with flat backless seats for the spectators, No chairs were used, as chairs emphasize special sitting areas for the spectators, thus separating them from the performers. “*We used levels. Flat backless seats of three different heights. . . . All these seats were flush on all sides: when they were placed side by side, a continuous platform was obtained, thus eliminating the auditorium-like appearance and bringing the spectators within the theatre*”.

In Muktamancha performances the spectators used to sit on the ground. To enhance audience participation Sircar also emphasised direct communication. It can be said that in his opinion, theatre is a living wire where one person can communicate with the other directly. He says, “*Direct communication from the live performer to the live spectators and their feedback—the principal advantage of theatre over cinema—was undermined, thereby weakening theatre*”. According to Sircar, a direct communication with the audience was necessary to extract the essence of exploitation faced by the protagonists of his plays. This could be achieved making use of the imagination of the spectators, secondly; by utilising the full space of the performance arena and thirdly; by making use of most of the personality and the body, including the voice of the performer. The biggest hurdle in achieving direct communication is the sets and stage lights of the proscenium stage and auditorium. Sircar observes the separation of the auditorium by light. “*The performers are in the lighted area, while the spectators are in the dark. This means that the spectators are supposed to hide themselves, obliterate their presence from the consciousness of the performers as well as their fellow spectators as much as they can*”. All of Sircar’s Revolutionary plays including *Procession*, *Bhoma*, *Indian History Made Easy*, *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* and *Stale News* are all based on his Third Theatre techniques. Thus, it is clear that on the basis of style and technique Sircar’s plays are postcolonial in character.

1.1 Objectives of Research

- a) To discuss about the philosophy, objectives and the origin of the ‘Third Theatre’.
- b) To find out the theatrical elements used by Sircar in his play ‘*Bhoma*’

1.2. Research Methodology

The present study is analytical in nature. It is based on Review of Literature and critical discourse analysis of the plays of selected plays of Badal Sircar. While the review is made on secondary sources, the analysis is done through a purposive sampling of Sircar’s plays keeping in mind the objective of the study.

2.0. Badal Sircar and the Universe of Third Worldism

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Third Worldism is an aesthetic connotation which is a sharp delineation from the marketable First World cinematic and other moving images. Specifically hailed as a movement of the Third World countries, it surpasses all the cultural iconoclasm associated with the cultural aesthetics of the First World namely conspicuous consumption of content, dramatic interpretation of life, larger than life images, violence, commodification of women, voyeurism and exhibitionism of male bravado. Third Worldism encapsulates socially realistic portrayals of life and the sufferings and struggles thereof. Issues like poverty, Nationalism, local problems, unemployment, migration, and search for identity, class and colonial hangovers are emphasised as components of Third Worldism. In the works of Ethiopian born American cinema scholar Teshome Gabriel, Third World aesthetics particularly in the case of moving images have three very distinct corollaries. First are those films of Bollywood which are adaptations from Hollywood mainstream movies emphasising on mindless violence and entertainment, excluding the real life issues of local people, their daily struggles and their sense of deprivation after being in the threshold of a colonial setup for ages. The second phase is the images produced by local producers harping on local culture and their histories and cultures, but carefully leaving the past historicities into a romantic oblivion. The third phase is that of “combative films” which takes a critical look at the society, the aspirations and failures of the people to acquire the daily amenities of life, example Chilean director *Miguel Littin’s ‘La Tierra Promenida’* (The Promised Land) in

1973 which used films to propagate ideology. Thus, we find that Third World-ism constitutes some common attributes like amongst nations that have experienced similar historicities like Communalism, agricultural exploitation, unemployment, hunger, industrial strikes and poverty, migration etc.

When Badal Sircar studied the failure of the Proscenium Theatres to reach the masses, he decided to communicate his understanding of Third Theatre by a more direct communication system. He devised his own theatrical technique which had a new perspective of involving the audience. So, he founded his own theatre form 'The Third Theatre' and wrote in his mother-tongue Bengali. He started his career by writing comedies and came to the limelight with the production of his famous play "*Evam Indrajit*" in 1965. The play's unique structure and ". . . the social utility of its theme drew an immediate attention of all concerned". It led to the translation of his play into several languages including English.

Badal Sircar also introduced the philosophy of Existentialism into Bengali theatre. He chose the educated middle-class Bengali as the character of his plays ". . . who tries to declass himself, refuses to accept the existing unjust socio-political system and urges others (the audience) to take an active part in bringing about a radical change in the society" (Sircar). His dissatisfaction with the prevailing order leads him to write plays. The significant themes of Badal Sircar's plays are the problems of poverty, class-conflict, and urban-rural dichotomy as well as ethnic and religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims instilled by the British.

One of the unique elements of Badal Sircar's plays is the semblance of folk elements interspersed in the dialogues. The use of songs in his plays comprises as one of the main component of Third World theatre aesthetics. According to him, the reason why folk elements such as *jatra*, *tamasha*, *bhawai*, *chhou*, *nautanki* were included was to add an element of entertainment to the otherwise serious content of the plays, secondly to give amusement to his audiences. This gave Sircar's plays a certain amount of portability. He interchanged the songs depending upon the place where his plays were being staged. In his own words, in doing so he was greatly influenced by Western theatre playwrights- ". . . *the theatre-in-the-round productions in London in 1957 and Paris in 1963, in the productions of Joan Littlewood in London, in Yuri Lyubimov in the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, in the CinoherniKlub Theatre and the Pantomime of Jari in Prague, in Jerzy Grotowski's*

production of Apocalypsis cum Figuris in his Theatre Laboratory in Wroclaw, Poland". (Sircar).

Sircar believed that if he wanted the undivided attention of his audience, he needs to communicate in Bengali. Though his upbringing had references from Christian lineage, yet he chose to write his legendary plays like *Ebong Indrajit (1963)*, *Michhil (1974)*, *Bhoma (1976)*, *Sukhpathya BharterItihas (1976)*, *Hattamalar Oparey (1977)*, and *Basi Khabar (1979)* etc. which later on, have been translated into English by others. He thought that English was the language of the colonisers- they interpreted whatever they saw in their language, the words were constructed to perpetuate the colonising mentality. He believed that adopting the English language is equal to adopting the culture of the British.

In all his plays we find Badal Sircar's deep connection with Marxist thoughts. He vehemently protests against the capitalist accumulation of capital and the deprivation of the proletariat. In *Bhoma* too we see him glorifying a peasant and speaking against class exploitation. Badal Sircar as a postcolonial playwright is also involved in criticising and demonstrating before the common masses the destructive financial and cultural effects of colonial rule and its exploitative policies which ruined the glorious structure of Indian society. In doing this, his aim is to make the common people aware of the exploitation of the coloniser. He does this through the medium of his Third Theatre. Instead of adopting the role of an "agitator" like other street corner playwrights, he prefers to remain . . . "*a propagandist who presents 'many ideas as an integral whole' trying to provide a complete explanation of the contradictions found in society. His plays have a lasting effect, which goes far beyond the immediate impact of street-corner plays. Badal Sircar is a Marxist but not a spokesperson of any established political party*". (Sircar).

In his play 'Procession' we see these postcolonial vibes both at the thematic and technical level. At the thematic level, the play will be dealt, among other things, with the problem of the disappearance of young men who are victims of police atrocities during the Naxalite movement. They are victimised for standing up for their rights. Such a young man is Khoka in this play. At the level of technique, the play will be examined as a product of Sircar's concept of the Third Theatre. Sircar established the Third Theatre form as a reaction against the British style proscenium stage and employed some of the techniques of both the Urban

(First) and Folk (Second) theatres. So, Badal Sircar's Third Theatre is also a very important aspect of the postcolonial content from the perspective of technique.

2.1 Third World-ism and Postcolonial Struggle of *Bhoma*

If '*Procession*' was a story of political unrest, '*Bhoma*' was the saga of a poor peasant against the backdrop of British colonialism. Badal Sircar was empathetic about the plights of the peasants of colonial India and protested in different forms about British exploitation. *Bhoma* is a metaphorical exploration of the daily plight of a poor subaltern peasant. In unwinding the story of *Bhoma*, Sircar intersperses his play with subplots depicting a saga of exploitation and misery, of deprivation and resistance. For present day critics, *Bhoma* is a fascinating tale of revisiting the colonial times. As Abrams and Harpham explain, "*The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has become constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse*". Even if a colony gets its independence, the poor peasants are never free from the clutches of the rich class who perpetually exploit them. This story of corruption of the rich and subjugation of the poor peasant runs as a background in *Bhoma*. Sircar was extremely passionate about the cause of the peasants of postcolonial Bengal. Though claimed by many, he not only wrote plays based on urban-rural divide, but he also sought to delve into the consciousness of the subaltern, people whose stories were lost in translation. *Bhoma* is one such play which takes a more intimate look into the trap laid by moneylenders of a pastoral society to exploit poor uneducated and simple peasants, domination of the weaker by the stronger, government's apathy towards agriculture and the transformation of the agrarian economy of Bengal into a marginal excluded society in postcolonial Bengal. It spoke about Third World debt, the catastrophic effects of atomic weapons, the disasters of flood and famine and the differences between the cities and the village.

Bhoma is a true story of a poor peasant narrated by the Headmaster of a school in Rangabelia in Sundarbans from whom Sircar heard the story. He staged the play in 1976 in the same village of Rangabelia, the play organised by his group Satabdi. Many question the existence of *Bhoma* in the entire play because he is never seen physically throughout the play. We hear references to *Bhoma*. His metaphorical presence acts as a form of motivation, hope, and symbol. *Bhoma* is the jungle. *Bhoma* is the cornfield. *Bhoma* is the village. Three quarters of

India's populations live in the villages. Millions and millions of Bhomans, In the cities we live on the blood of Bhomans.....if the Bhomans had rice, we would not have anything left to eat. In the words of BadalSircar, *"But Bhoma's story is not there in this play. Seeing, feeling and learning about our surroundings shock us, hurt us, anger us-these have come out in disjointed, dramatic pictures. Bhoma's picture was then part of those pieces. But when those pictures were strung together into a play then somehow it was Bhoma's image which started to become the link and at the end the play could not be called anything but Bhoma. When the pieces were being put together as a play, there were others in Satabdi who had also created images out of their experience (and feelings), which have been incorporated in the play. In that way Bhoma is not entirely my creation. In this play there is no character, no story, no continuity"*.

Sircar uses symbolism in the play Bhoma. Bhoma is signified as the symbol of Revolution-with one eye and a hollowed cheek (after struggling with tiger), as an icon of protest against the higher classes who subjugate the lower. Bhoma is also symbolised with the pastoral traditional society, he is the paddy fields, the forest, and the mud huts. There is no particular story in the play, it is a collage of mixed visuals of poverty, exploitation and disenchantment. In the words of Dutta *"There is no character, no story, and no continuity in the play. The message of the play is conveyed by the actors directly to the audience through words, sounds and physical acting. On the very first page of the play Bhoma, Sircar clearly states his objective that Bhoma is not for the amusement of the well-dressed front row audiences in a sumptuous auditorium. He aspires to convey through his theatre clear-cut and concrete truths about . . . what is happening in the villages at the grass-roots level, the nature of exploitation both industrial and agricultural, the urban stranglehold on the rural economy"*

2.2 Melancholy of the Marginalised in Bhoma

RustamBharucha points out the economic marginalization aspect in Bhoma, who confronts the dichotomy between urban and rural life in India. When Sircar came in contact with the villagers of the Sunderbans, he was shocked by the dehumanized conditions of their life. But more than shocked, he was enraged by the fact that the urban community of West Bengal (despite its own problems of transportation, generation of electricity, distribution of food)

could be so totally indifferent to the impoverishment of the villagers in the Sunderbans. He implanted all these motifs in his play.

Bhoma opens with villagers referring to Bhoma, a peasant but no one has ever seen him. Instead of talking about the plight of Bhoma, most of the villagers seem to be recalling the glorious life of the cities. The interesting part of the play is that none of the characters in the play have names but are only denoted by numbers. They fantasize about life in the Metro-flyovers, television, wide roads, airport, fancy restaurants. But none really know Bhoma. Sometimes he is a peasant, sometimes he is symbolized as the entire population of aboriginals who live in the forests, living in destitute situation. Bhoma belongs to the native aboriginals of India who live in the forests. He has cleared the forests of Sundarbans, with his parents and two kid brothers, to make land cultivable. He is a peasant and symbolises all the peasants who work hard in the fields for the whole day, but now their conditions are miserable because they neither get sufficient food to relieve their hunger nor are able to fulfill other basic necessities. Through Bhoma, Sircar projects the miserable plight of farmers, *“Bhoma’s mother died of snake bite. His father was dragged away by a crocodile before his very eyes. The younger brother couldn’t stand the tamarind and salt water mixture and died of diarrhea”*.

In the second scene we see how moneylenders are exploiting the simple peasants, they are building industries in the cities sucking the blood and flesh of the subaltern. Sircar often referred to the rice the rich men ate as the blood of the peasants. This has been voiced many times throughout the entire play. Being highly inspired by Marxism, he often refers to the capitalist exploitation and the industries reaping profits at the cost of the peasants. In the second scene we see an indigenous manufacturing unit (Mahamaya Engineering Company) manufacturing diesel pumps for a multinational company called Samson and Blackbird Company . The Mahamaya Engineering Co. sticks the name plate of Samson and Blackbird Co. on the pumps and makes specification literature for them. For this manufacturing process and pasting of name Samson and Blackbird Co. pays only two thousand five hundred rupees to the manufacturing company for each set while it sells one pump set for four thousand six hundred and twenty five rupees. In the play Bhoma, the representative of Mahamaya Co. reveals their plight and says that, *“Even that is not paid in cash. They pay us only after the sets are sold. So we’re always short of capital to make new sets”* (Sircar). *This is not only*

domination but a kind of exploitation which takes birth “. . . when one section of the population produces a surplus whose use is controlled by another section”

Ania Loomba, a critic of postcolonial studies, views this economic neo-colonialism as, “*The process of ‘forming a community’ in the new land . . .*” and adds that this “. . . necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions”. These practices of forming, un-forming and re-forming were produced and shaped by the writings such as public and private records, letters, trade documents, government papers, fiction and scientific literature. Loomba also states that contemporary colonial and post-colonial studies are trying to give meaning to these practices and writings of colonial period.

The third scene in *Bhoma* shows the apathy of the government towards improvisation in agriculture. *Bhoma* here is iconoclast as a rebel who demands proper water supply for his crops. The dialogue in the play goes as:

TWO. We want water give us water we want water give us water. . . .

*FOUR. We need fertilizers give us fertilizers we need seeds give us
seeds we need water give us water we need seeds. . . .*

And the reply is,

FOUR. There is none, none, none. . . .

*ONE. No water no fertilizer no seeds no land no food no clothes no
work no water. . . . (Sircar, Bhoma)*

This represents a deep melancholy in the hearts of the aboriginals who live in Rangabelia. The entire situation is a Third World phenomenon known as isolation. The farmers are excluded from having the basic amenities of life. They have to procure water from the pump set holders at a very high price to water their fields. Day by day the cost of water is reaching such heights that most of the farmers have to sell off their lands to the rich. The paradox lies in the fact that the government is transforming the Sunderbans into a tourist attraction whereas the very peasants who inhabit the place are being marginalized. A character in

Bhoma says “*An acre of my land was eaten away by Bidya river three years ago. . . . But we have to pay revenue still on that piece of land. . . . And will have to go on paying till the next Government survey*”

2.3. Lopsided Development and Migration of the Aborigines in Bhoma

BadalSircar’sBhomadepicts the ambivalence of the government about the plight of the farmers who were being marginalized and shifted to the periphery at the cost of development. According to Sircar, this development made no sense and termed it as a form of lopsided development because it sought to camouflage the real sufferings of three quarters of the population at the cost of a few rich industrialists. Roads, flyovers and entertainment zones were all being catered for the profit making of the rich. Thus, in the absence of land, work, profit and basic needs essential for survival, the peasants who are symbolised by the Bhomas in the play migrate to the cities in the search of livelihood. In Bottomore’s opinion, “*The greater amounts of capital required to compete in agriculture completes the removal of peasants from the land*” and the groups of these landless labourers travel to cities with their families . They come to the cities with the thought that they will work in the industries but the use of machinery in the industries eventually displaces them and they are compelled to work as domestic servants”.

One such scene shows how Bhoma is symbolised with all the peasants coming to the urban area in search of a job.

SIX. The Bhomas come in groups after groups to Calcutta. . . .

THREE. Bhoma’s mother, Bhoma’s wife, Bhoma’s sister, Bhoma’s daughter. . . .

FOUR. Wash pots and pans in the houses of the gentry. . . . (Sircar, Bhoma)

Lovelessness and individualism is also shown as a by-product of colonization in Bhoma. People are so much driven by material pleasures that they have are behaving like automated objects. Godliness has also become profit driven and less spiritual. In one of the conversations in Bhoma, it goes like:

ONE. Don't believe in love.

THREE. Then what should we believe in?

ONE. In things. Things, things and more things.

THREE. Only things?

ONE. You can even believe in God. A God that gives you things. A

God that takes away things from the unbelievers. (Sircar)

Thus the sense of individual pleasure runs so high in the people of the cities that even political parties do not shun away. In the name of patriotism, all that the parties do is to extract money and buy their own pleasure goods. They along with the bourgeoisie save all these money in Swiss Banks. In one of the scenes, a character speaks about the importance of studying abroad and getting an English education. The conversation goes on like this-

TWO. I'll sell my pots and pans, but he'll get his education.

THREE. Yes, yes, sell your pots and pans.

FOUR. Your country will also sell its pots and pans to educate him.

FIVE. Thousands of pots and pans will be spent to educate him.

SIX. Educated, he will depart in glory of America.

TWO. I'll get his picture printed in the newspapers.

THREE. Your son will earn thousands of dollars in America.

FOUR. You'll advertise in the papers for a bride for your son in

America.

FIVE. Meanwhile your son will have married a blue-eyed American

blonde. (Sircar)

2.3 Evaluation of Bhoma: Third World Optimism and Dream of Utopia

Bhoma, unlike *Bijan Bhattacharjee's Nabannya*, ends with the dream of all subaltern people—the dream for a classless, inclusive society where trees will not be mowed down to feed the industrial class, where forests will be retained alongside flyovers and bridges, where the peasants will also get profits after selling their agricultural products. Many scholars term this as the This World Utopia disjuncture in history where the poor feel connected to each other by their shared histories of oppression. Here the character Bhoma seems to dwell in Psychological liberation more than physical liberation and this gives the audience hope for a classless society. In his popular essay “Oppression and Human Liberation: Towards a Third World Utopia”, Ashis Nandi says that more than cultural traditions, it’s the suffering that binds postcolonial people together. According to him, the Third World is not a ‘Cultural Category’ but more of a more of a political and economic category born of oppression, indignity and self-contempt. The sense that someday things will be better actually resides as a ‘psychological utopia’ in the minds of men than in reality. He keeps on living thinking that some day this day will come, and dies in oblivion.

Bhoma has all the aspects of Third World Theatre aesthetics. It aptly speaks about the rural urban divide and in his play he makes both the urban dwellers as well as the farmers realise that they are incomplete without the other. In his interview with Samik Bandopadhyay, Sircar says, *“Thus Bhoma was written for people like us, aimed at our kind of people, not meant to be performed in the villages. But when we took Bhoma to village audiences, they found a point of identification in the issues it touched—underground water, agriculture, their problems, land relations—and its departure from the gods and goddesses and kings and rulers of all earlier theatre. There was nothing new for them in it in terms of information, it was all familiar stuff, they knew it all, I had learnt from them anyway. (qtd. in Sarkar)*

Like any Third Theatre, Bhoma is a collage of disjointed stories all having the character of Bhoma in the background, as a forest, as a peasant, as a tree, as a mud house. Most of his plays do not have a linear pattern as it is played in open spaces. The same character plays different roles in different scenes giving his play an uniqueness unparalleled. The following example from the play will illustrate this technique:

TWO, FOUR, FIVE, SIX put their hands on each other's shoulders, form a close circle, and begin to go round like a planet.

ONE kneels on one side. THREE lies in a corner for some time before suddenly jumping up.

THREE. If the blood of man is cold, then how can he love? Tell me, Answer! Don't human beings love? Is love dead? Come on, come on, answer! Do you want to kill love? Can you kill it? Can you?
The 'planet' does not answer; it goes round and round.

ONE gradually becomes a deformed human being, with a clown's grin fixed on his face.No you can't.
The earth will die before that!

TWO, FOUR, FIVE, SIX.This earth.

THREE. Yes, yes, the earth will. . . .

ONE comes closer.

THREE is terribly shocked.What's this? Who are you?

ONE. I'm one of the two million.

THREE. What two million? Which two million?

ONE. All the experiments with atom bombs that have been conducted up to 1962 on this earth. . . .

TWO, FOUR, FIVE, SIX. This earth. . . .

ONE. Have released enough radioactivity to cause the birth of two million maimed and deformed children. I'm one of the first lot.

They walk in a procession.

TWO, FOUR, SIX. Rejoice! Rejoice!

FIVE. 18th May 1974.

TWO, FOUR, SIX. Rejoice! Rejoice!

FIVE. India becomes a nuclear power!

TWO, FOUR, SIX. Rejoice! Rejoice!

FIVE. Number six in the world!They again move in circles like a planet. (Sircar, Bhoma)

Bhoma is an outstanding and unique play by Badal Sircar, written not to entertain the aristocratic spectators having seated in lavish theatre. Instead the play is an attempt to agitate the soul of common man of their responsibilities and duties towards downtrodden. Sircar points out various contemporary socio-economic issues- nuclear experiments and misuse of atomic bombs, heavy revenue taxes, exploitation of rural people at the hands of urban etc. The play ends on a symbolic end where many Bhomas are coming forward holding axes to cut the poisonous trees and rejuvenate the entire world.

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