

PROFESSOR P. R. BALGOPAL MEMORIAL LECTURE

NOVEMBER 06, 2025

EMBRACING SOCIAL JUSTICE: REIMAGINING PROFESSIONALISM

**by
Dr. Rajesh Tandon**

**Founder-President, PRIA; Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community Based
Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education.**

**at the 13th ISWC 2025, CUTM, Bhubaneswar, on
Thursday, November 6, at 02:15 PM.**

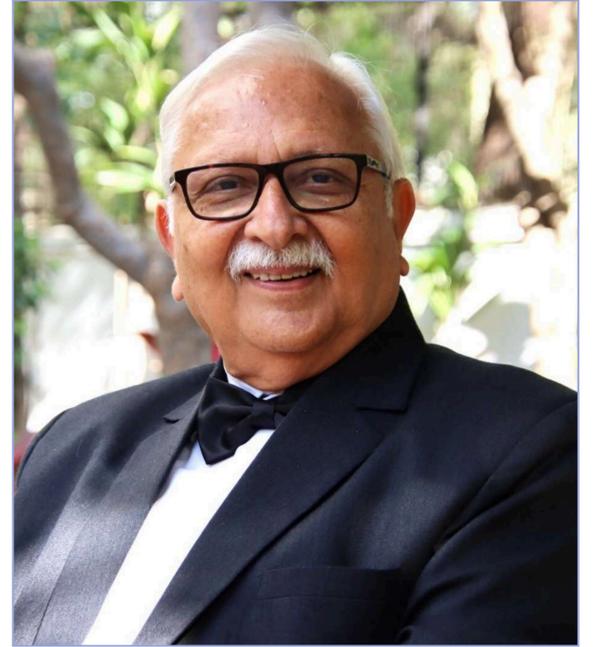
**Organized by
National Association of Professional
Social Workers in India(NAPSWI)**

Supported by Balgopal foundation

About the Speaker

Dr. Rajesh Tandon

Dr. Rajesh Tandon is the Founder-President of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and the Chairperson of Martha Farrell Foundation. He is also Co-Chair of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, since 2012.



A Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, USA and an electronics engineer (IIT, Kanpur) with a graduation in management (IIM, Calcutta), Dr. Tandon is an internationally acclaimed leader and practitioner of participatory research and development. A pioneer of participatory research, he has given new meaning to academic research by redefining the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Dr. Tandon has also served on numerous Expert Committees of Government of India, University Grants Commission, United Nations, Commonwealth and World Bank. He has authored more than 100 articles, a dozen books and numerous training manuals on themes such as democratic governance, civic engagement, civil society, governance and management of NGOs, participatory research and people-centred development.

In 2015, the Indian Adult Education Association (IAEA) awarded Dr. Tandon the Nehru Literacy Award. For his distinguished work on gender issues, the Government of India honoured him with the prestigious Award in 'Social Justice' in 2007. The University of Victoria, Canada, awarded Dr. Tandon the degree of Doctor of Law (Honoris Causa) in June 2008. He is the first Indian to be inducted to the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame (class of 2011). He is also the first Indian scholar to be inducted in Academy of Engagement Scholarship in 2019.

What is Social Justice?

Most of this conference would be familiar with the ideas related to what has come to be called 'social justice'. Much has been written about it, and several socio-economic development policies are said to be anchored in social justice. In its commonplace formulation, social justice implies fairness in treatment to all. More recent formulations have focused on practices related to access, equity, diversity, participation, and human rights. The starting point for practicing these ideals of social justice is an understanding of injustices; what conditions and structures of society at a given time and place make some sections of society face injustices?

"WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political..."

India's Constitution explicitly mandates social justice in its Preamble, establishing it as a fundamental principle for securing dignity, equality, and opportunity for all citizens. This constitutional commitment provides the foundation for exploring how social justice ideals can be realized in practice.

01

Justice

Social, economic, and political fairness

03

Equality

Equal status and opportunity for all

02

Liberty

Freedom of thought, expression, and belief

04

Fraternity

Dignity of individuals and national unity

The Preamble mandates that these ideals should be 'secured for all its citizens'. In today's context, before practical ways of securing these ideals evolved, the concept of 'citizen' itself has become contested. Who is a citizen? Who is a citizen in India for whom this Preamble is applicable? This question is not just being contested in India, but increasingly across the world. The 'oldest' democracy (America) is hotly debating the meaning of citizenship? Does colour of your identity card ('Green' or otherwise) define citizenship? Do your immigrant roots signify citizenship? If some are not citizens, are values of Preamble not applicable to them?

In the post-Westphalian era, nation-states have been assumed to be responsible for 'securing' the ideals of the Preamble. It is interesting to note that the official focus on ideals of 'social justice' is not common in most countries. While some forms of Ministries of Justice (law, public safety, etc.) are present in the structures of all nation-states, only India has a Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. By reading the focus of the Ministry, one can infer which sections of society require 'social justice and empowerment', as per the government's analysis.

Contested Citizenship and Responsibility

The Citizenship Question

Before practical ways of securing justice evolved, the concept of 'citizen' itself has become contested globally. Who is a citizen? Does identity documentation define citizenship? Do immigrant roots signify citizenship? If some are not citizens, are Preamble values not applicable to them?

In post-Westphalian era, nation-states are assumed responsible for securing justice ideals. Interestingly, while most countries have Justice Ministries, only India has a Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment—revealing unique governmental acknowledgment of structural inequities.



Target Groups

- Scheduled Castes
- Other Backward Classes
- Senior Citizens
- Victims of Substance Abuse

Marginalized Communities

- Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes
- Transgender persons
- Manual Scavengers
- Waste Pickers

Are these the only categories experiencing injustices? Which other sections face discrimination? How do we identify them, and whose responsibility is it?

Adivasis: Custodians of Nature

Knowledge Keepers

Adivasi communities developed knowledge systems over generations, infused with spirituality and wisdom for co-habitation with nature

Sacred Stewardship

They worship mangroves, hills, water bodies as sources of life, relating to all habitation as living beings

Communitarian Ethics

Moral order and ethical codes ensure communitarian governance of their habitats and resources

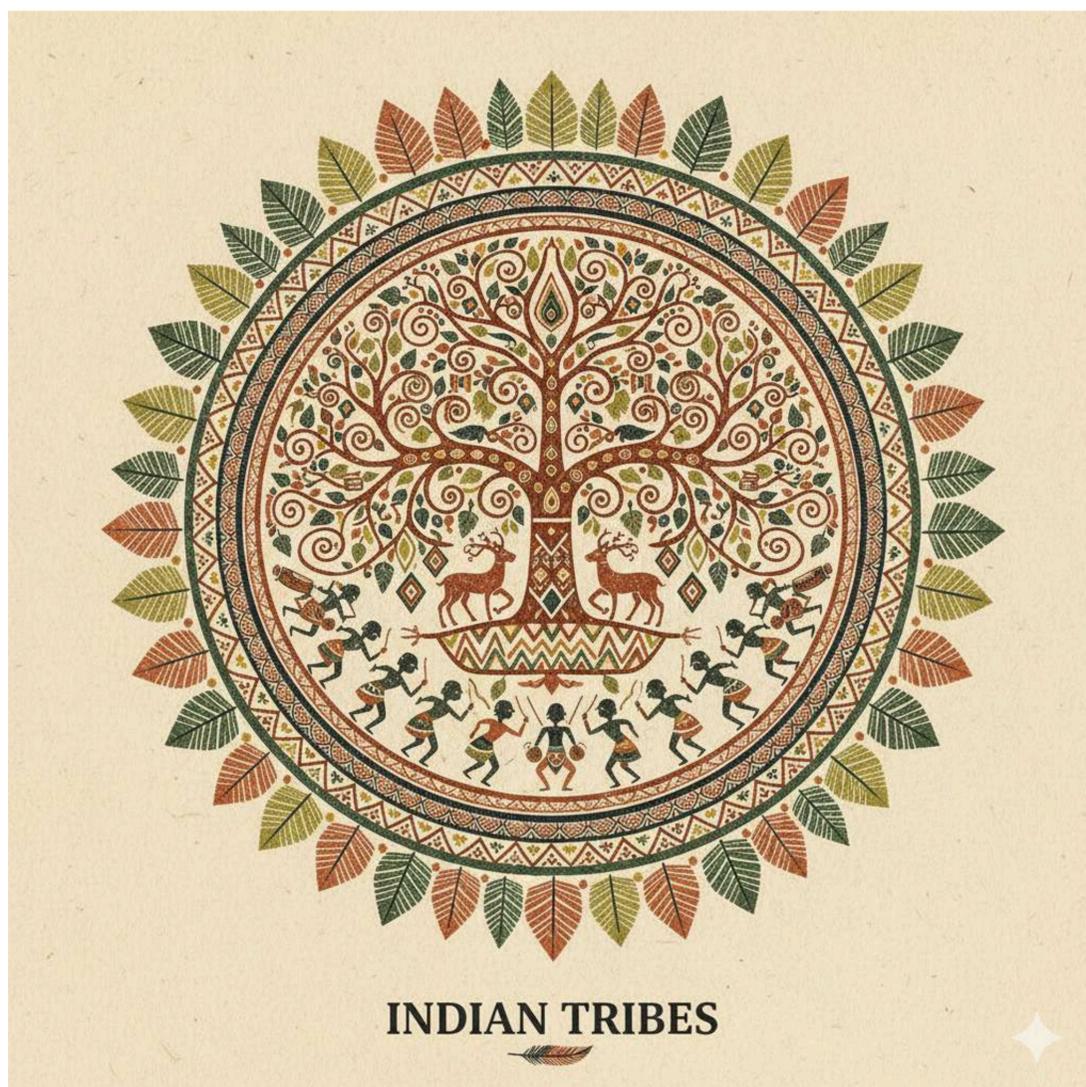
130M

Adivasi Citizens

About 9% of total population

India has nearly 130 million Adivasi citizens living in all parts of the country. Though called Adivasis, they're not included in the global indigenous category. The British Colonial administration labeled them 'scheduled' and demarcated areas for them. Yet their approach to living in and with nature represents profound ecological wisdom.

In post-independence India, Adivasis have been displaced from habitats, their knowledges delegitimized, their forest management competencies ignored—and now they're being 'skilled' in driving rickshaws. Tribal welfare schemes must be assessed in this context.



Dalits: Epistemology of Resistance

Most talked about social justice welfare schemes in India are meant for Dalits. As a formal identity, this section of society is labelled "Scheduled Caste". They constitute nearly 17% of India's population, about 250 million today. Much has been written about historical injustices and structured marginalization of such communities. Various schemes for education, economic development and social empowerment for SCs (and Dalits) have been implemented over the decades. However, Dalits constitute nearly half of all urban informal daily wage workers today; most sanitation workers continue to be from Dalit community.

Other than Dr Ambedkar and some other historical intellectuals, not much reference is made to Dalit knowledge system, culture and rituals. They produce enormous amounts of sub-altern knowledge with deep insights into 'epistemology of resistance'. Dalit aesthetics and spirituality values collective rituals; its moral and ethical order gives dignity to manual labour. It is now 100 years of Self-Respect Movement[1]. But hardly any schemes for skilling for Dalit youth recognize and certify their existing knowledges and skills.

Dalits produce enormous amounts of sub-altern knowledge with deep insights into 'epistemology of resistance'



Marginalized Knowledge

Other than Dr. Ambedkar and some historical intellectuals, little reference is made to Dalit knowledge systems, culture, and rituals



Collective Aesthetics

Dalit aesthetics and spirituality value collective rituals with moral order giving dignity to manual labour



Unrecognized Skills

Hardly any skilling schemes for Dalit youth recognize and certify their existing knowledges and competencies

It is now 100 years of the Self-Respect Movement, yet systematic recognition of Dalit expertise and knowledge remains absent from mainstream social justice programs.

Persons with Disability: Crip Technoscience

One of the most 'visible' sections of society 'needing' social justice programs are assumed to be 'Persons with Disability (PWD)'. Disability is one of the most hidden features of Indian society. While some physical features of disability are in public domain, larger sections of society face invisible forms. It is only now that depression, loneliness and other forms of mental health issues have been brought into open discourse.

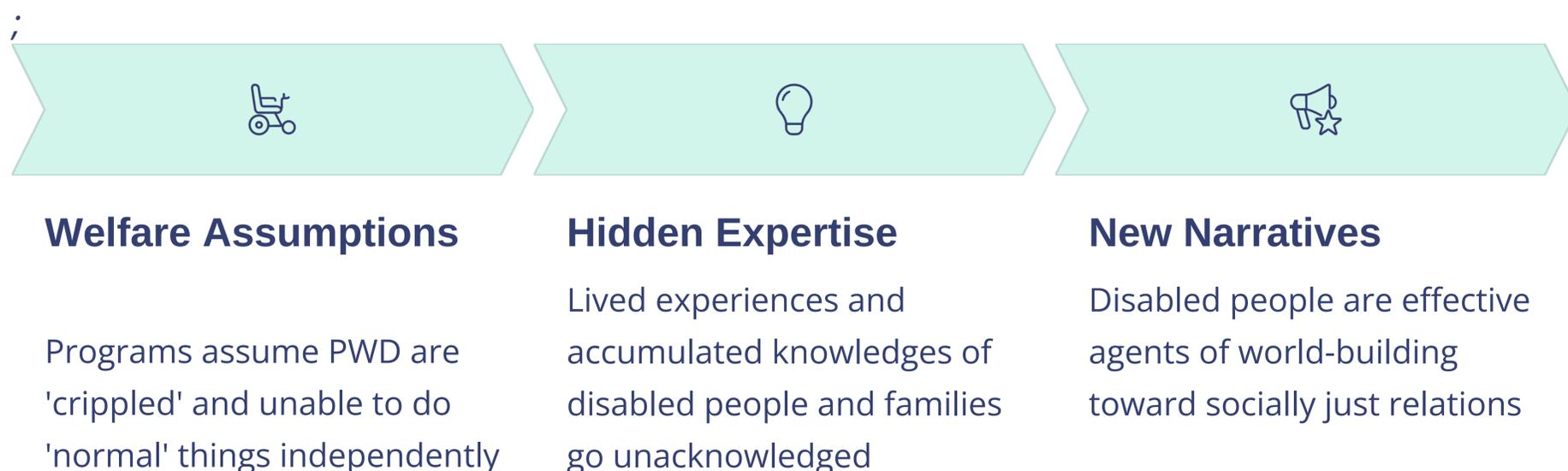
Welfare schemes and assistance provided for 'social justice' of PWD assume that such persons are 'crippled' in some ways, and hence unable to do many 'normal' things on their own. The lived experiences and accumulated knowledges of such people and their families are hardly acknowledged. Taking pity on them, charitable assistances' are offered by both public and private programs.

New conversations highlighting knowledge and expertise of 'crippled' people are loud and clear:

"As disabled people engaged in disability community, activism, and scholarship, our collective experiences and histories have taught us that we are effective agents of world-building and -dismantling toward more socially just relations. The grounds for social justice and world-remaking, however, are frictioned technologies, architectures, and infrastructures are often designed and implemented without committing to disability as a difference that matters. This manifesto calls attention to the powerful, messy, non-innocent, contradictory, and nevertheless crucial work of what we name as "crip technoscience," practices of critique, alteration, and reinvention of our material-discursive world. Disabled people are experts and designers of everyday life. But we also harness technoscience for political action, refusing to comply with demands to cure, fix, or eliminate disability[1]".



[1]Hamraie, A. & Fritsch, K. (2019). Crip Technoscience Manifesto. Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience, 5(1), 1-34. (<http://www.catalystjournal.org>) | ISSN: 2380-3312



Transgender: Language and Self-Determination

"In a heteronormative, cisnormative world, language creation is one of the ways that those who live outside the norms of sexuality and gender resist normative frameworks and imposed labels"

"Terminology is critically important in self-determination as well as in collective, community understandings of identities, experiences, and ways of being that have been violently suppressed"

5-10M

Trans Population

Estimated range in India



Given widespread social stigma and taboos, it's hard to estimate transgender population in India or anywhere. Some estimates indicate 5-10 million trans people in India.

Formal welfare schemes provide shelter homes, skilling, and economic activities. However, underlying assumptions treat 'trans' phenomena as 'abnormality'—some biological deficiency causing deviation from norms. Social values define who is normal and who is not.

In widespread heterosexual practice and belief, 'trans' behavior is understood as 'abnormal' and treated medically. Trans people argue that social factors cause mental distress and behavioral responses, not inherent biological deficiencies.

- ❑ *Trans communities emphasize that in heteronormative contexts, language creation becomes an act of resistance and community-building, essential for self-determination and collective understanding of suppressed identities.*

Embracing Social Justice: Everyday Actions

Social justice requires social actions—not merely by social workers, but by society itself. Many injustices occur in communities, homes, schools, colleges, and workplaces. What roles should society play in promoting justice?

01

Respecting Differences

Learning to respect differences in families, communities, students, teachers, workers—everywhere—is the first step

02

Believing in Agency

Believe in innate capacities of all individuals to act with compassion and desire for self-improvement

03

Understanding Context

Agency for self-improvement exists within all individuals, exercised without external stimulation—understand it in-situ

04

Recognizing Knowledge

Knowledge is everywhere. Each person is knowledgeable, creator and user of knowledge through multiple ecologies

05

Practicing Epistemic Humility

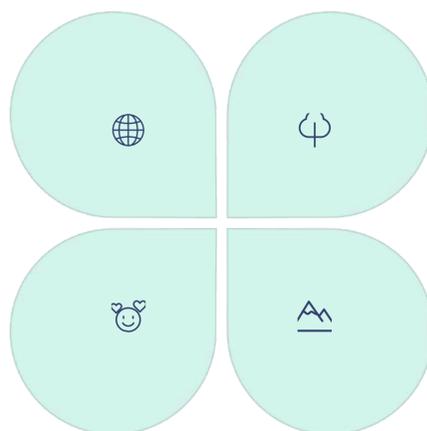
As professionals, respect for others' knowledge and expertise is an act of social justice

Local and Relational

While theories and policies appear universal, realities and actions are mostly local. Locally appropriate meanings and practices of social justice need energizing. Social justice is a relational concept—its meaning exists within social relationships. Actions that support justice practices are relational. Building, nurturing, and strengthening those relations are critical.

Planetary Worldview

Recognizing life in all nature, not just humans



Deep Ecology

Biotic and spirited world perspectives

Central Dignity

Every person's right to be valued and respected

Sacred Tenor

Rivers and mountains integral to social justice

Dignity means the right of every person to be valued and respected for their own sake, and to be treated ethically.

Reimagining Professionalism

Your profession is 'social justice work', not merely social work. If social justice entails promotion of values and practices described here, how do you view professionalism?



Confidence in Expertise

Trust in your professional knowledge and capabilities while remaining humble

Code of Ethics

Following integrity, fairness, and ethical principles in all professional conduct

Commitment to Service

Dedication to serving communities with dignity and respect

Questions for Reflection

- Can social justice work professionals imbibe and practice these three features?
- Will this approach be hard to practice when market price determines professional service character?
- How will new generations learn this different approach to social justice?
- How will teachers reorganize pedagogy for facilitating learning of such professionalism?



This annual gathering of professionals—teachers and students—is an opportune space for exploring such questions as we embrace social justice. Let us commit to reimagining professionalism that centers dignity, respects diverse knowledges, and acts relationally in service of justice for all.

Thank you!

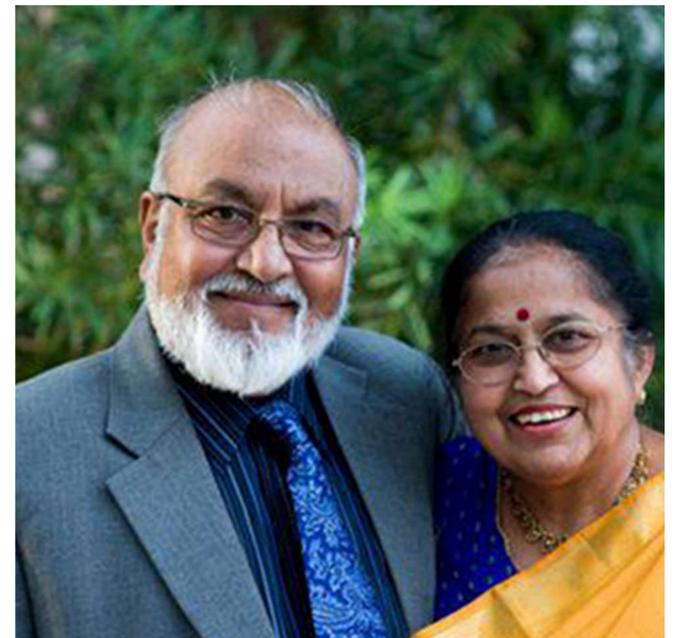
About Lecture

Prof P R Balgopal Annual Lecture on Social Justice in India is initiated by NAPSWI with the support of Balgopal Foundation. This annual lecture is in honor of Professor PR Balgopal and his beloved wife, the late Mrs. Shyamla Balgopal. retired from the University of Illinois in 2000. He brings six decades of experience with him. has been human right and social justice champion throughout his career. the University of Illinois is organizing an annual lecture in his name on human Rights which has been regularly held for the past 17 years.

Needless to say social justice is most cherished value as well as goal for social work profession. This effort will help to discover how to use the constitutional values of equality, liberty, and fraternity as foundational tools in everyday social work practice on one hand on other hand it ensures to re-imagine the professional's role not as a mere service provider, but as a crucial facilitator to unlock community power structures to achieve social justice. This lecture is supported by the Balgopal Foundation. Dr Rajesh Tandon, a well known name in social sector has consented to deliver inaugural lecture.

Prof. P R Balgopal & Shyamala Balgopal

Professor Pallassana R Balgopal, a prominent social work educator, boasts over six decades of experience. is a Professor Emeritus from the University of Illinois. His impactful work focuses on multicultural social work, Human Rights, Social Justice particularly with immigrant and refugee populations, Asian Indians, and Asian American families. Dr. Balgopal's research and publications, including influential books, advocate for culturally competent and socially just social work practices. Recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award by NAPSWI, his contributions have profoundly shaped social work theory and practice globally.



Ms. Shyamala Balgopal was an esteemed librarian and dedicated community volunteer, having earned her master's in library science. She enjoyed a distinguished career as a university librarian, notably as a reference librarian and assistant professor emerita at the University of Illinois. Passionate about service, she helped to establish the Annual Balgopal Lecture on Human Rights and Asian Americans particularly welcoming immigrants. Remembered for her kindness and commitment, Shyamala Balgopal left a lasting impact before her passing in January 2023.

The National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (NAPSWI) is one of the largest member-based organizations for professional social workers in the country, established in 2005. It is a non-profit, non-political organization dedicated to:

- Promoting the standard and status of the social work profession.*
- Improving the quality of services in the social welfare and social development sectors.*
- Protecting the interests of social work professionals.*

NAPSWI has been granted special consultative status by the UN ECOSOC since 2019 and actively collaborates with various stakeholders, including educational institutions, government bodies, and civil society organizations. Its mission includes advancing excellence in education, training, and practice of professional social work through advocacy, research, and networking. The organization also aims to enhance the quality of social work education and practice in India.

NAPSWI



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