
UNIT 6 RETURN OF GANDHI

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi left the shores of South Africa at the age of forty-five, a fully formed personality, with no personal property and with only one ambition, of serving his country and people. Though the Indian political leaders were aware of his work in South Africa, he was not much known to the Indians in general. To most Indians, he was “the great Gandhi” who had guided the Indians in South Africa towards self-respect and justice through Satyagraha. Gandhi was a full-fledged Satyagrahi by the time he returned with a keen sense of self-discipline, which he ardently followed although his life.

On his return, Gandhi found himself in a country he scarcely knew, for he was away from his motherland for almost twenty eight years. He sought to understand the undercurrents of those times and searching for his roots, he was tentative and cautious in those early years in India. His political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, advised him to travel through various part of India for a year so he could learn about his land and people, with “his ears open but his mouth shut.” He was convinced that the British rule was harming India, but India also needed to remove the evils prevalent in its society and system before she was fit for self-governance.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The significance of Satyagraha as a potential tool of solving problems
- Gandhi’s Satyagraha in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad mill cases
- The struggle against the Rowlatt Bill
- The importance of non-violent struggle

6.2 BEGINNING OF PUBLIC LIFE

Sabarmati (Satyagraha) Ashram-1915

By May 1915, Gandhi established the first ashram in India at Kochrab, near Ahmedabad. An Ashram is usually a community living retreat and in India there has been an ancient tradition of many spiritual leaders establishing such ashrams to spread their spiritual and philosophical ideas. As the Kochrab village was affected with plague and the obstinate villagers refused to let him organise the sanitation, Gandhi decided to move his ashram on the banks of the river Sabarmati, popularly known as Sabarmati Ashram, founded on May 25, 1915. Beginning with twenty-five inmates, who vowed to a life of chastity, truth, non-violence, non-stealing, non-possession, control of palate, shramdan, swadeshi, religious harmony, fearlessness and removal of untouchability, the Ashram was dedicated to the service of humanity in every possible way. Mahatma Gandhi had laid down certain rules and regulations, **“Maxims of life” “laid down by our scriptures”**, for spiritual guidance.

The ashram was a living example of Gandhi’s ideology applied practically in day to day life. Soon, an untouchable family of three sought permission to live there and Gandhi willingly accepted the family, who consented to follow the ashram rules and regulations. Their admission created a flutter and led to stoppage of all monetary help but later, with help from an anonymous visitor, finances were stabilised. The admission of this family proved a valuable lesson to the Ashram inmates, training them to countenance untouchability. Subsequently, as the storm over their entry subsided, Gandhi received support from all quarters in his ashram work. The Ashram functioned like an organised community, where the Charkha became the focal point of Gram Swaraj and the sounds of the spinning wheel became the anthem of the masses toiling for freedom. The Khadi movement had begun in earnest. It remained the headquarters for the next fifteen years and it was here that Gandhi met his devoted disciples and staunch followers like Mahadev Desai and Sardar Patel. This ashram was Gandhi’s abode till 1933 and was later turned into a centre for the removal of untouchability. The Ashram was a glorious symbol of Gandhi’s dedication to the service of mankind that continues to play an inspiring role till date.

Speech at the Banaras Hindu University, February 1916

Gandhi delivered his first public speech in India on 4th February 1916, on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Banaras Hindu University, attended by many distinguished visitors like the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, Mrs. Annie Besant and many members from India’s erstwhile royal families. Gandhi, speaking in English, expressed his **“deep humiliation and shame”** at being compelled **“to address my own countrymen in a language that is foreign to me.”** He emphasised upon the need to make Hindustan and the vernacular languages as the basic medium of education in the country, so that precious years of students’ lives are not wasted in trying to master a foreign language like English. Gandhi’s hard hitting speech succeeded in “turning the searchlight” inwards. In all his public and private speeches he made it clear **“I feel and I have felt during the whole of my public life that we need, what any nation need now, is nothing else and nothing less than Character building.”** In this hard hitting speech he, in his gentle, modest way, offered a criticism of India. He referred to the splendour of the princely class, the over-powering influence of English as the medium of communication instead of Hindustani and vernaculars, the dirt, poverty, illiteracy as the degrading factors of Indian life. The Indian masses were instantly taken by it, as it came from a man who lived like the millions of

them, speaking for the poor and the downtrodden. The echoes of his words reverberated through out the country, even in those pre-radio days by a word of mouth.

6.3 CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA, 1917-18

The uncertainty over his actions in his homeland took a concrete shape in the Champaran movement in Bihar. The indigo fields of Champaran in Bihar provided him the first opportunity of using the powerful tool of Satyagraha in solving a long-standing dispute. It was during the Indian National Congress Session at Lucknow in December 1916 that an obscure peasant from Bihar, Rajkumar Shukla, decided to acquaint his fellow countrymen with the plight of the indigo farmers.

In its early years the East India Company had discovered that the cultivation of the indigo plant was immensely profitable. The plant, a delicate one, needed marshy land for growth and armies of peasants were recruited forcibly to cultivate it. They were paid very low wages and were forced by Law to plant three twentieths of their holdings with indigo, and the harvest was handed over to the factory owners in part payment of rent. For long oppressive years of tyranny the factory ruled, indigo was the king and the poor peasantry was at the mercy of the landowners. Destiny chose upon an earnest peasant in the farm of Rajkumar Shukla from Champaran who would simply not take no for an answer. He wanted the Mahatma to visit his district and see for himself the condition of the indigo cultivators.

Gandhi went to Champaran undertaking a term of action, distinctively his own. It was the predecessor of the psychological pattern he applied to all his activities. He started with Patna where he met many lawyers, Congress members and people from various sections of society, and asked them to accompany him to Champaran and help the sharecroppers in any possible way they could. He made it quite clear to those volunteers that they must be prepared for all eventualities, even going to prison and they must pledge themselves unconditionally to help the cause of the indigo farmers. The system was new to Indians but gradually the nation learnt the way their leader wanted to get it organised into action. It was during the Champaran movement that he befriended some great future national leaders and lifelong associates like Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Acharya J. B. Kripalani among others. Gandhi's presence had electrified the people and it was felt that at long last something would be done for the peasants not through court action, but in an entirely new and unexpected way.

Gandhi explained his work plan to a convened committee of lawyers and teachers where he said the time for legal action had passed and now the need of the hour was a careful examination of the facts through interviews with the farmers and careful reports. The lawyers and teachers, although very well educated, had to work like clerks in collecting the reports and compiling them. There would be no agitation, just a quiet accumulation of thousands of reports on the grievances of the indigo farmers. These activities were to be undertaken in full view of the police and government officials. There was to be no violence at all.

Gandhi was on a new testing ground where except for the farmer Rajkumar Shukla, he knew nothing about the lives of the indigo sharecroppers, knew very little about the existing complicated system of land-tenure and was unfamiliar with the local dialect as well. He was convinced by the lawyers and teachers that the situation as explained by Rajkumar Shukla indeed required urgent attention as well as action. In his methodical

way, Gandhi warned the opponent- the head of the indigo planters' association and Government District Commissioner that he intended to investigate the grievances. Their responses clearly indicated their non-cooperative attitude and he knew that in all probability he would be imprisoned. But in spite of everything, he proceeded to collect depositions from indigo sharecroppers of the region.

It was a new kind of defiance to the British Government, one to which it was yet to grow accustomed. Gandhi attracted the downtrodden farmers so powerfully that they flocked in thousands to be where he was, to see him, to hear him and to narrate their woes to him. In order to save the situation the British authorities decided to order him to leave the district stating that his object was "likely to be agitation rather than a genuine search for knowledge." He replied to the local commissioner that he desired only to conduct a genuine search for knowledge and rejecting outrightly the order of expulsion he made it quite clear to the authorities that "Out of a sense of public responsibility, I feel it to be my duty to say that I am unable to leave this district, but if it so pleases the authorities, I shall submit to the order by suffering the penalty of disobedience." He sent telegrams to the Indian leaders working with him and wrote a letter to the secretary of the Viceroy that the peasants in the district were living "under a reign of terror and their property, their persons and their minds are all under the planters' heels." He returned to the Viceroy the *Kaiser-I-Hind* Gold Medal, awarded to him for humanitarian work since it was clear that his humanitarian motives were being questioned. Gandhi was greatly assisted by his friend, C. F. Andrews in his work. He also prepared a set of rules for his co-workers to follow, in case of his arrest, that the inquiry into the peasants' grievances was to continue under the direction of Sh. Brijkishore Prasad, a man with a sharp legal mind with immense talents.

Gandhi appeared for trial and pleaded guilty and declared his decision to pursue the inquiry, and even if failed he would resume it the moment he was released. Sensing unrest and tension, the local judge Mr. Heycock, in consultation with his superiors, dismissed the case against Gandhi and the Lt. Governor ordered that the local officials should assist him in the inquiry. After this unexpected victory in his first confrontation with the British rulers, he proceeded with his depositions. Simultaneously, he was also organising his recruits, in this case affluent professionals from the state, into men dedicated to the quest for truth. By now Gandhi and his co-workers had collected thousands of depositions from the farmers, much more than needed to prepare their report but Gandhi had another purpose in his mind. It was evident to him that these poor farmers were accustomed to centuries of oppression, exploitation, starvation and flogging. What they needed was to be "**free from fear**" as he said.

Gandhi sent for volunteers to teach the ignorant, illiterate villagers the basic concepts of hygiene and the value of education and himself took up the task of scavenging, washing, sweeping, and started six schools to impart basic education. The reformer in him always taught by his own example. He always felt that obligations need to be fulfilled if we are striving to attain our rights. Though the government was growing wary of Gandhi's presence in Champaran, he made it quite clear that he would leave the region only when the grievances of the exploited sharecroppers were recognised and redressal started. The government instituted the Champaran Agrarian Committee with Gandhi as a member and after a series of deliberations of the committee, the Champaran Agrarian Act was passed on April 26, 1918. This ended the infamous "**Teen Kathia**" tradition. The government was forced to return the revenue collected unlawfully.

The Champaran experience is the first triumph of Satyagraha in India. Gandhi had gained a humanitarian objective by his own distinctive means of truth, self-control and non-violence. Champaran was, practically, the introduction of Satyagraha to India where Gandhi told the British firmly and politely **“that they could not order him around in his own country.”** A young British civil servant of that time was among the first few who witnessed and recognised Gandhi’s transformation from a man to the Mahatma. He writes on April 29, 1917, after his first meeting with Gandhi “we may look Mr. Gandhi as an idealist, a fanatic, or a revolutionary according to our particular notions. But to the raiyats he is their liberator and they credit him with extraordinary powers. He moves about the villages asking them to lay their grievances before him, and he is transfiguring the imagination of the masses of ignorant men.”

The Champaran movement was the country’s first direct object lesson in civil disobedience and its introduction to the leader who was destined to lead the nation to freedom through Satyagraha. In the Champaran movement, Gandhi combined the socio-political awakening amongst the farmers along with intensive constructive programmes which included education, health, sanitation etc.

6.4 AHMEDABAD TEXTILE MILL LABOUR SATYAGRAHA: February – March 1918

While Gandhi was about to conclude his work in Champaran he received an urgent appeal from the textile mill workers of Ahmedabad. The dispute arose between the textile labourers and the textile mill owners of Ahmedabad. It began basically over the dearness allowance payment to be made to the workers by the owners. Earlier during a plague epidemic, the workers had been granted a special bonus, so that they would continue working during the epidemic period and the bonus had continued even after the danger from the disease had subsided. But in January 1918, the mill owners decided to withdraw the same and in reply the workers asked for a 50 percent raise in their wages. Gandhi, upon being informed of the situation, was asked to intervene, first by one of the mill owners. He went to Ahmedabad and started investigating the matter thoroughly. After having studied the cost of living and workers’ conditions, he concluded that an increase of 35 percent was appropriate. He felt that the mill workers’ grievances were genuine and the mill owners were unrelenting to redress those grievances.

Both sides agreed to submit the dispute to arbitration on behalf of the workers. In a surprising move the mill owners declared that they would not abide by the arbitration and threatened to dismiss all those workers who were not ready to accept a 20 percent increase in the living allowance.

Gandhi advised the workers to demand no more and no less than a 35 percent increase as their living allowance. Conflict followed the rejection of this demand by the mill owners and Gandhi found himself leading the struggle of the mill-hands and advised them to go on strike but by taking recourse to non-violence and self-support through other work to sustain themselves (many of them helped in setting up a weaving school in Gandhi’s Ashram) and not surrender until the raise of 35 percent was secured, and not to indulge in quarrels, theft and destruction of mill owners’ property. Gandhi’s organised non-violent struggle paid off with the use of Satyagraha as the technique to achieve a constructive solution to a problem.

'Ek Tek' (United resolve) was the slogan of the workers and Gandhi continuously guided them towards peaceful agitation. Upon witnessing signs of cracking under pressure within the ranks of strikers, he declared his intention to fast till the settlement is reached. Fasting for a specific purpose was another characteristic of the Mahatma's genius, which India had witnessed in its use and effect for the first time during the Ahmedabad Satyagraha. The general nature of every fast of Gandhi was that of a prayer for peace and sanity. For Gandhi it had become a permanent element of his existence and during the course of the independence movement led by him, the terrifying power of his fasting was unleashed on the unsuspecting in such a way that almost the entire nation came to a standstill, in remorse for its failings. In the Ahmedabad Satyagraha his fast resulted in the settlement in favour of the striking mill workers amicably.

The Ahmedabad Labour Satyagraha established the strength of dealing with any kind of conflict, where fasting proved to be a greatly effective weapon of non-violence with its coercive character. The next important factor here was the 'truth factor', the justification behind the demand of the self-suffering was present in the workers' attitude. The workers also received training in various forms of labour during the strike period, which included carrying heavy loads of brick for a building at the Ashram, as well as weaving and other ashram activities. The Satyagraha was effectively publicised through peace marches, slogans of "Ek tek" and distribution of leaflets by the Satyagrahis. Throughout the peaceful struggle, the initiative was with the Satyagrahis. This movement also highlights the role of arbitration in disputes as to how it can help conclude a Satyagraha by a peaceful solution to the conflict. The most tangible evidence of the success of the Ahmedabad Labour Satyagraha is the development of the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association during this struggle in 1946, it was said that it was "the most powerful labour union in the country with a membership of 55,000"; and it was recognised as outstanding for its "indigenous character.... and its system of joint arbitration and conciliation fostered by the influence of Gandhi". The union is remarkable for its adherence to Gandhian principles of non-violence for self-sustenance in cases of lockout, strike, loss of employment etc. These trainings are also in keeping with the basics of Satyagraha and proved to be a practical lesson in Gandhian principle of employee – employer relationship and constructive programme-based approach for improving the conditions of workers.

6.5 KHEDA SATYAGRAHA, March 22nd to June 6th 1918

In 1918, large parts of Gujarat were affected by a severe famine and Kheda was the worst hit district. The agrarian economy was devastated but the British Government of the Bombay Presidency was least concerned about the plight of the poor farmers. It insisted that the farmers not only pay full taxes but also that 23 percent increase effective from that year was to be paid.

The peasants of Kheda wanted the revenue assessment for the year to be suspended on account of crop failure due to the famine, but the government turned a deaf ear to their plea. The peasants turned to Gandhi for help since petitions to the government and press statements failed to have any effect. Gandhi felt that civil disobedience on a massive scale was required to force the government into reasonableness and reduce the taxes. Gandhi travelled through the affected villages and found that the plights of the farmers were genuine and he advised them to refuse to pay undue taxes and also advised them to remain non-violent in their protest.

A Satyagraha sabha was formed under his guidance to set up at Nadiad orphanage and marked the beginning of his association with stalwarts like Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahadev Desai. Among other followers were Anusuyaben, Shankarlal Banker, and Indulal Yajnik who took the Satyagraha pledge and actively participated in the movement. Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as the chief organiser of the Satyagraha who, giving up on his western lifestyles of a well established barrister, became one with the poor peasants, walking from village to village giving strength to the farmers to remain firm on their demands.

The methods applied for Satyagraha were peaceful protest meetings, negotiations, assessment of facts by public enquiry, formation of political associations, no-tax campaign, courting arrest, printing and distribution of pamphlets, prayer for self-purification etc. The refusal to revenue payment made the government resort to police action and intimidation squads to seize property, cattle as well as whole farms. These officers even attached the standing crops of the farmers. An official had attached a crop of onions and Gandhi felt it was permissible for a good Satyagrahi to go out at night and remove the onions because the attachment was unfairly made. 'The onion thief' Mohanlal Pandya, a lawyer Satyagrahi was arrested for this crime and given ten days simple imprisonment. Thousands of farmers and Satyagraha activists were arrested but there was no violent incident on the part of the protesters. The revolt evoked great sympathy all over the country, and finally the Government relented and suspended the payment of revenue for the poor farmers.

This Satyagraha, though not as categorically clear cut as the other movements, taught the peasants to fight for their rights by shedding their lethargy as well as the lesson of self-reliance and self-confidence. The power of mass action was once again pitted against the might and emerged victorious.

6.6 THE ROWLATT SATYAGRAHA (1st March to 18th April 1919)

The infamous Rowlatt Bill was the outcome of the recommendation made by the Sedition Committee presided over by Sir Rowlatt in 1918, and was prepared to strengthen the hand of the government in the control of crime and sedition. The Rowlatt Act (Govt. of India Act No XI of 1919) "was formed to enable an archical offences to be tried expeditiously before a strong court, consisting of three High Court Judges, with no right to appeal." It also provided powers of preventive detention - the arrest and confinement of persons suspected of acts threatening public safety, and also the power to ask such people to furnish security, reside in a particular place or to abstain from any specified act. The Act also provided the authorities to detain "dangerous" persons.

The Rowlatt Bill totally denied civil liberties to Indians and was also responsible for bringing Gandhi into active Indian politics. The report of the Rowlatt Committee recommended an extension into peacetime of all the wartime rules in suppression of free speech, freedom of the press and the right of assembly. Gandhi called the passing of the Rowlatt Act as a "farce of legal formality."

This was the turning point in Gandhi's life as a strong political force in India as well as the entire world and became instrumental in bringing him to the mainstream politics of the country. Faced with a political situation of grave importance, he realised that the time might have arrived for the application of the principles of Satyagraha on a national level. He travelled through the country to prepare people for a mass movement against the

Rowlatt Bill. In spite of official and unofficial appeals, the Viceroy signed the bill on March 18, 1919 and the Rowlatt Act became law.

To Gandhi, the repressive Rowlatt Bills were a direct breach of faith and betrayal of trust. Continued British audacities, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar and the rousing discontent simmering in the country were instrumental in bringing Gandhi into the forefront of national leadership leading India to its logical historical destiny through a series of mass movements. Gandhi drafted and circulated a pledge of resistance to the Rowlatt Bill: 'In the event of these Bills becoming law and until they are withdrawn we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws as a committee to be hereafter appointed may think fit, and further affirm that in this struggle we shall faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person and property' (cit in BR Nanda, p.109).

The idea of *Hartal* to protest against the Rowlatt Act on 6th April 1919 was unique and the response to this call was widespread. Gandhi writes in his Autobiography the beginning of the Rowlatt Satyagraha in this context thus: "The idea came to me last night ...that we should call upon the country to observe a general hartal. Satyagraha is a process of self-purification, and ours is a sacred fight, and it seems to me to be in the fitness of things that it should be commenced with an act of self-purification. Let all the people of India, therefore, suspend their business on that day and observe the day as one of fasting and prayer. The Musalmans may not fast for more than one day; so the duration of the fast should be 24 hours. It is very difficult to say whatever all the provinces would respond to this appeal of ours or not, but I feel fairly sure of Bombay, Madras, Bihar and Sindh. I think we should have every reason to feel satisfied even if all these places observe the hartal fittingly." Accordingly, the entire country, barring a few exceptions went on massive strike. In the big cities people did not go to work, banks could not operate, ships were neither loaded or unloaded, public transportation stood still, post offices were not working. That there was an astonishing non-activity in almost every sphere of life proved beyond doubt that a new active force was in operation. The bewildered British authorities tried to treat it as "sedition" but realised that it was something much more powerful and effective than mere "Sedition".

The immediate objective of this Satyagraha was the withdrawal of the enacted Bill which was passed to "cope with Anarchical and Revolutionary Crime" and the prevention of the passage of the second Bill; and the long-term objective of the entire movement was to mobilise support and intensify political awareness. In a way, it heralded a new era in the nationalist struggle for freedom. The movement saw the massive participation of "millions" of Indians across the country led by Gandhi and the nationalist leaders. The official British report of the movement makes mention of the "unprecedented fraternization between Hindus and Muslims, "women and children also came out of homes to take part in the Satyagraha". The Satyagraha pledge emphasising adherence to truth and non-violence was taken by the protesters and the mass participation was initiated by a day of "humiliation and prayer" with Satyagrahis taking up a 24 hour fast to strengthen themselves for offering civil disobedience. Thousands of volunteers sold copies of the books 'Swaraj' and 'Sarvodaya' on the streets. The government was jolted out of its complacency to see the war time "recruiting sergeant" of the Empire turning into a rebel.

The enthusiasm generated by his appeal for hartal gradually escalated towards violence when the news of Gandhi's arrest spread like wildfire. Following a widespread violence across India, Gandhi appealed to people to adhere to truth and non-violence, but soon realised that people were too excited to listen to his voice of sanity. As a result he

suspended the Satyagraha movement and undertook a three-day fast as penance for the violence committed by the people.

On 13th April 1919 when Gandhi had announced his three-day fast decision in Ahmedabad, a horrifying massacre of innocent citizens took place in the city of Amritsar. A peaceful gathering of people had assembled at the Jallianwala Bagh to celebrate Baisakhi and also discuss the participation in anti-Rowlatt agitations. Brigadier General Reginald Dyer, who had been given the task of maintaining peace and order in the area, learnt about the meeting at Jallianwala Bagh and regarded it as a deliberate defiance of prohibitory orders regarding public meetings. He sent troops and ordered indiscriminate firing upon the crowd till all ammunition was expended, with no forewarning. In this gruesome display of British atrocity, the official count registered 400 dead and one to two thousand injured but the unofficial inquiry conducted by Gandhi himself estimated 1200 dead and 3600 wounded.

The atrocities continued which included public stripping and flogging of Indians and General Dyer's infamous "Crawling orders" on a particular street in Amritsar where a mob had beaten up an English woman. Indians were made to crawl on all fours on this street as punishment. The British Government appointed the Hunter Committee to look into the Punjab atrocities but Gandhi and other national leaders boycotted it and constituted a parallel enquiry committee on behalf of the congress to look into the matter. It comprised of Sh. Motilal Nehru, Sh. C. R. Das, Abbas Tyabji, Mr. Jayakar and Gandhi, and its findings were not disproved at all.

This tragic incident proved beyond doubt that there was no hope in the British Government. The British officials, suffering pangs of guilt and with a desire to do better for India in future, brought in the same year, 1919 the Montague Chelmsford Reforms offering Indians a constitution and a share in the Government but it was more an eyewash than a genuine offer. Gandhi advised the leaders of the Indian National Congress to 'make a success of the new instalment of reforms granted by the British Government and thus prepare for a fuller measure of responsibility' (BR Nanda, p.112).

6.7 SUMMARY

Undoubtedly the non-cooperation movements as initiated by Gandhi helped the common man gain strength, confidence and courage to raise his voice against injustice and violation of his natural rights. The leaders of the Congress shed their elitist attitudes and became one with the masses of the country, serving them and providing leadership to them, as the movements were unprecedented revolts against the British rule in India. Prisons became like a pilgrimage for the freedom fighters, Swadeshi feeling gripped the nation with great fervour and the nation hummed to the lyrical chants of the Charkha. The educational institutions of the country became the training grounds of the patriotic national movement for freedom. From Champaran to Non-cooperation movement and to last, Gandhi's methods ensured non-violent struggles and an indomitable spirit.

6.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. 'Champaran was the beginning of Gandhi's Satyagraha in India'. Discuss it at length.
2. Examine the Satyagraha struggles in Ahmedabad textile mills and Kheda and their relevance.
3. Discuss at length the Rowlatt Satyagraha.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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