

# Legacy of Sikh Women in Gurmat Sangeet

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, the significance and impact of Sikh women in specifically Gurmat Sangeet will be discussed as oftentimes women are forgotten and not acknowledged for their meaningful work. The discussion will begin by acknowledging famous Sikh women and their impact in Sikh history. Then the contributions of women in the history of Gurmat Sangeet will be identified alongside exploring the different contributions women are making today. For example, women who are educating others today, contributing in research, etc will be mentioned. The issue of cultural and gender barriers with its potential solutions will be then brought up to address the broader issue. The overall goal of this paper is to spread awareness and to recognize the contributions Sikh women in the past, present, and future.

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## **Introduction**

Gurmat Sangeet is an important concept that has been around for many decades as it continues to have a major impact. But what is Gurmat Sangeet? Gurmat Sangeet is musical traditions and foundations in raagas to help understand the teachings of Guru's message. It is very embedded in the sacred scripture, Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

Gurmat Sangeet uses tools such as raags to emphasize and help address the messages at a more powerful pace. A raag is meant to provoke emotion as it is used to compile most of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. For example, Shree raag is the first Shudh raag in Guru Granth Sahib Ji and it is a tense, serious raag provoking a devotional, thought filling nature.<sup>1</sup> While Raag Asa is the 4th Shudh Raag in Guru Granth Sahib Ji provoking a feeling of inspiration and determination to achieve one's goal in a happy way.<sup>2</sup> These ragas are intentionally placed where they are to help guide one on their spiritual journey as by switching these ragas will mess up the structure and foundation of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

Moving on to the overall contributors of Gurmat Sangeet, there are plenty who have made meaningful contributions and others who continue to do so today. many Gurus have contributed to the overall foundation and making of many raags. Guru Nanak Dev Ji has contributed to 19 raags, Guru Angad Dev Ji has contributed to 9 raags, Guru Amar Das Ji has contributed to 17 raags, Guru Ramdas Ji has contributed to 29 raags, Guru Arjun Dev Ji has contributed to 30 raags, and Guru Teg Bahadur Ji has contributed to 15 raags. There have also

been 15 bhagats and 11 bhatts who have contributed to Guru Granth Sahib Ji.<sup>3</sup> Another famous contributor has been Bhai Mardana Ji who has helped in the Sloks of Bihagra Ki Vaar. However women are oftentimes overlooked as they have helped a lot in the role of nurturing, educating, and performing Gurmat Sangeet.

Gurmat Sangeet has the power to make a profounding emotional impact on each and every individual. It is written both independently and dependably based upon if it is a Shudh Raag or a Mishrat Raag to convey the specific mood of each and every melody. It helps by not only sending the message to the mind but also by making a deep, emotional feeling to the heart. When the music and beat combine with the specific raag, it creates this feeling of balance between the heart and the mind.<sup>4</sup> Every raag creates a devotional yet unique feeling, guiding one in their spiritual journey.

As important as it was for these many contributors to help create the idea of Gurmat Sangeet, it is equally as important to preserve and nurture this cultural tradition. Gurmat Sangeet is an important tool that people should continue to use on their spiritual journey as its raags are capable of being applicable perpetually. Many Sikh women continue to put in endless effort to help reach that goal of preserving the idea of Gurmat Sangeet and spread awareness about it.

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### **History of Women's Presence**

Across Sikh history, not only in Gurmat Sangeet, it has mainly been documented by male contributors when women have always played an essential part throughout these times. There are numerous important women who have helped not only to the struggle but have also led big groups of Sikhs. For example, Bibi Sahib Kaur was a real-life warrior princess who led armies in Punjab while protecting her kingdom from people like George Thomas. Instead of running away from these harsh situations, she battled with absolutely no show of fear.<sup>5</sup> Another famous woman in history is Bibi Sharan Kaur who lived during the time of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. After the significantly large battle of Chamkaur, many Sikhs were martyred. But Bibi Sharan Kaur showed her bravery by pretending to temporarily align her perspective from the Mughal's standpoint, acting as a spy for the Sikhs. She found out exactly where the bodies of the martyred Sikhs were hidden, and secretly helped give them proper funerals. Even when she was caught by the Mughals, she didn't give in, even if it meant giving her life.<sup>5</sup> Oftentimes in history, major male leaders are focused on for their courageous and significant actions when many women have also shown how both genders can be equally important in fighting for preserving their religion and culture.

Moving onto women contributing specifically to Gurmat Sangeet in the past, there have also been countless helping to preserve this important piece of tradition. For example, Simran Kaur along with many other female individuals noted how they were the ones who would sing kirtan and the raags of Guru Granth Sahib Ji for countless hours. They would do it with full devotion and passion for the Guru, no matter who would see it or who would not. For example

she explained how “In the villages, it’s mostly the women who maintain the gurdwara. The men usually leave for work in the morning. Whoever reaches the gurdwara first begins the practice”.<sup>6</sup> The women were constantly the ones who were also working to protect the cultural tradition in private spaces by leading these kirtanas.

Another notable contribution was by the Gurmat Gian Group of the Gurmat Gian Missionary College. This group was a Ludhiana, India based group who were singing multiple raagas filled with many teachings and messages. However it was noted how their recordings were very hard to find because it was not documented enough to get easy access to. These women had made a lot of important contributions though by producing six CDs with the thirty-one Shudh Raags.<sup>7</sup> This group had a very unique style of singing and was created by Gurpreet Kaur who would oftentimes not only sing the raags herself but also create recordings to help teach others around her.<sup>8</sup> The group had one main motto or expression: “To sing gurbani in raaga is not the same thing as to sing raaga in gurbani”. Their authenticity toward how they sang each raag to match its corresponding mood is what engaged listeners a lot. By recording multimedia, various recordings, and albums they increased the access people had to Gurmat Sangeet. Gurpreet Kaur also led many Gurmat-Sangeet based classes in the mid-late 1900s at the college, helping to grow other individuals’ knowledge. Although their contributions were initially difficult to attain, their legacy is one to definitely honor and build upon for generations to come.

Women have often been overlooked in the public view when in reality they have always maintained an important role of engaging and upholding Gurmat Sangeet throughout their communities. They not only have helped themselves on their own individual spiritual journey but were capable to help others around them by devoting themselves to execute the heartfelt emotion of each raag passionately each time they were performing.

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### **Modern Developments: Sikh Women as Researchers, Educators, and Cultural Preservers**

As many Sikh women have held key roles of preserving this cultural heritage in the past, many continue to do so in different types of roles today. In recent decades, Sikh women can be seen as researchers, educators, formal speakers, presenters, and much more for supporting to continue to nurture this Sikh musical tradition. As decades pass, it is important to note how individuals adopt different styles of methods to sustain these traditions and practices.

A significant and well-known figure who has been involved with this area for decades is Dr. Gurleen Kaur. Kaur is a Canadian American with an ethnomusicology doctorate from University of Maryland<sup>8</sup>. She has not only researched studies of Sikh Music for twenty-five years but has also applied it by educating others of multilevel participants, including adults and children, around her about the sacred tradition for about twenty years. By devoting her time to helping others learn, her selflessness has a huge part in preserving the practice of Gurmat

Sangeet. Dr. Gurleen Kaur has skills across different areas like Western & Indian music, allowing her to adapt her teaching styles for each individual as per to what they need to succeed. Her research papers provide an even deeper insight about the practice on the factual level. Along with research papers and education, her presence at numerous conferences globally have helped a wide range of people. Because of her focus on connecting individuals to different shabads and raags on an in-depth level, she has managed to guide them on their path of inner discovery. Her legacy continues to impact people on a whole other level and will forever be remembered.

Another pro-active female individual in the Sikh community has been Jasbir Kaur Khalsa. She first started off by being a student herself and learning from Attar Singh about Gurmat Sangeet who was known to sing lots of raags and shabads. Then as she got older, she wanted to make a real-world impact. As a result, she started spreading information about Gurmat Sangeet locally by taking a part in creating the Chair of Gurmat Sangeet at Punjabi University, Patiala. This was the only university to offer fields of study involving Gurmat Sangeet and a masters degree in the area.<sup>9</sup> By taking upon a major role in the building of this university, she helped broaden the access people had to the education of Gurmat Sangeet. Alongside, another job she took on was continuously motivating others to attend Divaan locally at their gurdwaras. To award her for all of her work so far, she allegedly had her portrait hung in the Golden Temple's central Sikh museum. However, her work didn't stop there, after working on making a local impact, she desired to make a global impact and so that is exactly what she did. In 1977, Khalsa took on the role of traveling alongside Bhai Jiwan Singh's group to various places such as parts of Europe, Canada, and the United States of America.<sup>9</sup> Over there, she would continue to spread information about the Guru Sahiba's message and how important it was to keep Gurmat Sangeet around in various methods. For example, Jasbir Kaur Khalsa helped establish so many keertan programs, camps, conferences to educate all types of individuals no matter their demographics. She potentially became a well-known Sikh missionary specifically known for keeping this Sikh musical tradition alive which included singing the raags of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. People were so impressed with her that she was brought back to teach the language of Gurmukhi and Gurbani Kirtan to the American Sikhs part of the 3HO, "Holy, Healthy and Happy Organization".<sup>10</sup> But nobody notes the sacrifices that Khalsa has made in her life including leaving her regular life in India, leaving her parents, taking upon new places with no idea of how the people would react. That takes major bravery and courage to accomplish as it is no easy task. She has managed to impact hundreds of individuals and bring them closer to Guru Sahiba's messages. She was even said to have "organized the biggest Kirtan Darbar at Taran Taran to mark the 400th anniversary of Guru Arjan's Martyrdom"<sup>10</sup> in 2006. Khalsa has shown commendable effort in not only connecting herself spiritually but taking on the missionary role of helping others on their self-discovery path and giving the tools of Gurmat Sangeet to them to make them more likely to be successful in their individual goals. In Khalsa's life, she has been able to earn many honors as she deserves it all. For example, on October 31, 2010, Khalsa earned a state award at the "Heritage Festival of Daughters"<sup>10</sup> and was honored by many respected Sikh individuals in the community. Jasbir Kaur Khalsa's accomplishments are forever lasting as they

continue to be acknowledged and have a world-wide effect on the Sikh community. Khalsa was able to unite people of the community together throughout different places of the world while giving them the resources to be successful individually.

There have been plenty of women who have shown their contributions through writing and literary works. One famous Sikh woman researcher Dr. Inderjit N. Kaur wrote the paper called, "Sikh Shabad Kirtan and Gurmat Sangit: What's in the Name". Kaur went to the University of California, Santa Cruz and developed a paper going in depth about "shabad kirtan" and its historical developments, theoretical parts, as well as its practical components. In the paper, she gives insights on how raags are the major organizing pieces of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji with each of its detailed shabads and the way it is specifically organized. She dissects the musical forms such as the following, Pade, Vaar, Chhand, Partaal, Barahmah, Thiti, Pahre, Pati & Bavan Akhari, Ghoriaan, Alahnian, Arati, Ruti, Salok, Sadu, and Sohila along with important terminology. For example, Kaur focuses on the terms such as Ras which is "the mental state that the Shabad text evokes in the listener"<sup>10</sup>, Dhuni which is the melody of a raag, and Ghar which are "number designating raag versions, giving a number of supporting arguments". While Kaur focuses on the spiritual and structural purpose of Gurmat Sangeet in her paper, she alongside advocates for women getting their deserved rights to perform on official and big stages as they were oftentimes the ones who preserved the tradition in private and small spaces. They were the ones producing and maintaining these authentic traditions in especially small villages so they should get equal rights in performing these same practices on all stages. Having people like Dr. Inderjit N. Kaur advocate for women's rights while educating individuals on their platform is what is necessary in order to keep this community moving forward. Her paper allows more people to access the idea and essence of Gurmat Sangeet while educating on what is wrong and correct in our society. Oftentimes, people overlook the issue of gender imbalance when in Sikhism, equality has always been promoted since the beginning like during the time of Guru Nanak Dev Ji who was always advocating for everyone to be treated equally. It is important to acknowledge how these women have constantly been fighting to preserve Gurmat Sangeet and to not let their hard worked efforts and selfless sacrifices for the better of other individuals go to vain.

Alongside these hardworking Sikh women in our community, there have been more women who work to preserve the culture of Gurmat Sangeet in different ways. One of them includes Bibi Guneet Kaur Ji who had been a part of this tradition since the age of seven years old where she first gained knowledge from her mother and aunt. She did her graduate school in Allahabad University where she was able to attain her Masters in Indian Classical Music.<sup>11</sup> Here she was able to deepen her understanding about musical theory and more. Later she used all of her verbal knowledge about Gurmat Sangeet to help pass it down to plenty of other students and trained them across the world. She taught them the basics and fundamentals of Gurmat Sangeet and ways to execute their learning through raag-based keertan from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Not only that, but she performs her own practice of Gurmat Sangeet on a pretty regular basis as

well. However her own learning didn't ever stop as she continued to seek education and help from Dr. Gurmat Singh Ji, Professor Rajinder Singh, and more.

Another important woman who has helped a lot is Dr. Nivedita Singh who was able to receive her Masters Degree in formal education in music and PhD in Sociology of Hindustani Music from the University of Delhi.<sup>11</sup> Her love for Gurmat Sangeet was clearly showcased through her leading Raagis and other respected Sikhs. She was able to express her knowledge of Gurmat Sangeet through her beautiful, melodious singing of the different Raags of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji at various places. Her passion and dedication towards this classical tradition was even more expressed with her being able to educate others about the specific styles of Gurmat Sangeet as she is a professor at the Department of Music, Punjabi University, Patiala. Dr. Nivedita Singh was able to share her passion for Gurmat Sangeet with different types of individuals overall and that is something to note and heavily acknowledge.

It is encouraging and astonishing to see the different, unique ways in how Sikh women contributed to Gurmat Sangeet. From women like Dr. Gurleen Kaur, Dr. Inderjit N. Kaur, and Jasbir Kaur Khalsa taking upon pro-active roles to research and educate hundreds of people about the verbal knowledge of this raag-based musical tradition to people like Bibi Guneet Kaur Ji and Dr. Nivedita Singh worked to preserve the practice by executing the Gurbani based raags in a musical way. Because of all their contributions, the culture is able to spread to newer generations on a wider scale basis which it's important because these newer generations are the future of our culture and traditions.

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### **Cultural Barriers and Progress**

Although all of these different, hardworking Sikh women continue to work heartily to keep our tradition of Gurmat Sangeet alive, a problem continues to arise in our society. There is a lack of acknowledgement and recognition to all of these women who make it part of their role to preserve raag based Gurmat Sangeet. As there were previous works of some incredible women mentioned before, many other Sikh women who are scholars, teachers, performers, etc are working towards the same purpose but their work is oftentimes undocumented and gets overlooked. Even in the 20th century, women are facing not only equality but also equity problems which should not be a big issue in our society but currently are. Each and every woman's work that is rooted in the spiritual heritage and learning of the raag-based tradition deserves equal recognition as to any male in the history of Gurmat Sangeet.

A common issue many Sikh women continue to see is the gender imbalance of males being favored to execute practices of Gurmat Sangeet at high profile places, specifically like the Golden Temple. In the Golden Temple, specifically, women seem to be demotivated to have any participation in practicing Gurmat Sangeet through different Sikh instruments. Jaswinder Kaur, a professor in Gurmat Sangeet at Mata Sundari College in New Delhi, is seen to make a comment

about it as she states, “Why can’t a devoted, disciplined, and musically-trained woman be allowed to perform *kirtan* in the main hall of the Golden Temple, when they have been able to perform in the [other] *gurdwaras* on the same campus.”<sup>6</sup> To specify, keertan is the practice of performing the raags and teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji on Sikh instruments like the dilruba, harmonium, and much more. As long as a person has the will, passion, and love to perform the raags of the Guru, it shouldn’t matter what gender they are. This problem has been seen at other places as well, not only the Golden Temple. For example, Bibi Rajinder Kaur, another prominent participant in Gurmat Sangeet also spoke out in 2022 and stated, “It will be one year next month since I was given any duties to perform in the gurdwaras in Delhi”<sup>6</sup>. Also according to “The 2022 Directory of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee”<sup>6</sup>, among the singers for the 62 raags and dhadis, there were no females listed as a singer. Given that a gurdwara is a given space for people to not only showcase their passion but also preserve the musical tradition of raag-based Gurmat Sangeet, excluding women solely because of their gender, limits and silences their participation and contribution towards Gurmat Sangeet.

Time after time the same issue arises around Sikh women’s equitable participation in specifically Gurmat Sangeet, but there are some actions and small steps being taken to help solve this problem. A key starting step toward progress of this issue has been raising awareness about the problem in the first place. Many people aren’t aware of this societal injustice against women’s participation and contribution towards Gurmat Sangeet because it just hasn’t ever been heavily acknowledged. However there are such articles like “FEMALE VOICES IN GURBĀNĪ SANGĪT AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING FEMALE KĪRTANĪE”<sup>12</sup> that has been published in *Sikh Formations Volume 10, 2014* discussing the “norms” that have kept women from practicing and contributing to the classical musical tradition. They start off by giving the basic fundamental information about Gurmat Sangeet itself to lead the readers in and then discuss the overall big issue of not letting women be a big part of this tradition. Strategies in recognizing while offering new opportunities to change this “norm” is then also discussed. Additionally, there are also more articles in the *Sikh Formations Volume 10, 2014* examining the gender imbalance in this classical music tradition then going on to honor many women and their contributions to Gurmat Sangeet whether it is through educating others about the tradition, writing research papers on it, and or just simply executing the raags and the Guru’s teachings through keertan. All in all, having articles and books about the issue represents a major step of cultural progress being made as they start these important conversations everywhere. Many of these articles are also published online and talked about in conferences that are recorded which is helpful because the digital platform allows people to connect from all over the world. Raising awareness is truly an important effort to make because it allows young females to realize what they can achieve as it motivates them to take upon an important role in Gurmat Sangeet. It helps lay the foundation of shifting different mindsets across many places by simply discussing the issue and honoring the many contributions made by all genders. Ultimately, bringing attention to the issue is a powerful effort being made to help produce a larger cultural change.

Another step that is being taken to close this gender gap around Gurmat Sangeet, is this leading non-profit organization called Raj Academy, that specifically works to evoke this emotional and internal communication using the power of the sound of Gurmat Sangeet.<sup>13</sup> Raj Academy plays an important role of fostering a safe and encouraging place for female participation in Gurmat Sangeet by offering inclusive Gurmat Kirtan Training, Rababi Outreach, Naad Yoga Teacher Training, Sound Therapist Certification, and many more courses. Through focusing on using these musical instruments as tools to further evoke the emotional meaning of the raagis, Raj Academy encourages women and men to engage and deepen their understanding in the emotional and spiritual parts of Gurmat Sangeet. They focus on the training of different Sikh instruments to execute the teachings of the Guru like the Rabab, Saranda, Jori, Sarangi, Taus, and Dilruba. Raj Academy not only motivates females to participate in their programs but also to lead them once they acquire the knowledge. For example, in their academy, they have many women helping the academy thrive, such as Rajinder Kaur who is a lead teacher, Rababi Outreach and Niranjana Kaur who is a Lead Teacher, Sound Therapist, and Sound Alchemist. Their leadership helps express how women are continuing to fight for not only engagement but leadership as well within Gurmat Sangeet.

Having physical inclusive places for all genders to have the opportunity to enrich themselves into Gurmat Sangeet is a vital step to take towards gender equality and equity. An example of this can be seen through the Akal Gurmat International Camp where they emphasize on inviting all genders in this two week camp to learn about the teachings of the Guru, to learn how to sing the different raagas and their meanings, and the rhythmic beats of the different instruments used to execute the practices of Gurmat Sangeet.<sup>14</sup> By encouraging this open space for women and men from all over the world to come engage and explore the concepts of Gurmat Sangeet, the community not only fosters the shared responsibility of keeping this cultural tradition alive but also makes a step ahead together as a society.

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### **Conclusion: Reflecting on Legacies While Moving Forward**

As described previously in this paper, Gurmat Sangeet continues to hold a deep place in the culture of Sikhism. From helping the culture grow by taking upon a role as the roots of the sacred culture to continuously helping indulge people into the culture today, Gurmat Sangeet is an important tool that should always be remembered. It holds the sacred teachings of the Guru Sahiba while also involving the instrumental part of the culture. All in all, Gurmat Sangeet helps guide people on their internal path to remain spiritually close to the Guru Sahiba.

To help preserve Gurmat Sangeet, there have been countless women in the past consistently working towards that goal even if their stories have been untold. From women such as Dr. Gurleen Kaur who has devoted countless hours and has adapted multiple teaching styles, she has successfully been able to influence many individuals across the world on their path of Gurmat Sangeet. Along with Jasbir Kaur Khalsa who has always shown bold steps to continue to

inspire many young individuals around the world on their spiritual path using Gurmat Sangeet. By helping create the Chair of Gurmat Sangeet at Punjabi University, Patiala, she has been able to immense not only herself but others as well in their individual journey involving this Sikh raag tradition. However there have been countless other women working towards the same goal in rural areas who have not been able to be recognized for their hard work. As mentioned earlier, in rural areas it was much more common for the women to run the gurdwaras and help keep that musical culture alive while their husbands were out at work. They were the ones spending countless hours executing the teachings and the raags of Gurmat Sangeet through classical instruments. These women have not only helped preserve the tradition but also have helped the sangat around them immense themselves into forming even deeper connections with the Guru.

However women have consistently faced systemic challenges across generations and continue to face some today. They have been denied to showcase their love for Gurmat Sangeet on large platforms such as the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab and across many gurdwaras in India. They have been denied to show their contributions to the Sikh classical raag tradition and have been excluded from participating in any of the practices involving Gurmat Sangeet. In response, women have to continue to try to engage themselves in the tradition whether it's through organizing big events such as Gurmat Camps across countries, engaging in interviews and podcasts about educating young individuals on Gurmat Sangeet, or simply teaching the instrumental part of the tradition. They continue to work hard in different ways to not only allow themselves to engage in the tradition but also to hold a role to aid others in their Gurmat Sangeet journey with a selfless heart. Appreciating every single one of these females' efforts towards Gurmat Sangeet is crucial in preserving the tradition and keeping it alive for future generations to come.

Structural and gender-based barriers still exist and will continue to exist in the future if actions aren't taken to help get rid of these barriers. A gender shouldn't be able to decide what an individual is allowed to do and isn't. Some steps being taken to raise awareness about this issue include various digital articles and books found online discussing the gender imbalance, creating physical spaces that accept all genders, having non-profit organizations working towards cultural progress, and much more. By dismissing any roles women have in Gurmat Sangeet, the diversity and richness of what Gurmat Sangeet holds is eventually risked. So documenting the hard works of all genders will allow Gurmat Sangeet to continue holding the legacy of richness and variousness that it composed at once.

There are some tactics that could be done in the future to help further address this issue. Actively creating even more spaces and initiatives for Sikh women to be engaged in and welcomed in should be the primary goal. This could be done in various ways including having more educational spaces about the foundations of Gurmat Sangeet led by already educated Sikh women and then offering scholarships for female students could be another great idea. But also having all gender keertan programs in gurdwaras across not only international countries but also in India could be a potential goal as well. Women who are already educated about the sacred culture could potentially also lead workshops in gurdwaras and camps. Some easy digital ideas

could be various platforms and non profit organizations using social media apps to their advantage such as Instagram, Tiktok, and Youtube.

The legacy of Sikh women in Gurmat Sangeet shouldn't be a defined topic to the past as it is an evolving concept. Every shabad line sung, with every raag spoken, the voices of these women continue to carry on this sacred tradition holding emotions of nothing but love and devotion. As a community, it is everyone's job to listen and recognize each and every voice of these women who hold any role in Gurmat Sangeet to ensure that whoever the future generations are, know who has helped keep this culture alive along the way.

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