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## **Gender and Culture: The Evolving Agency of South Asian Female Immigrants**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines agency: the decision-making capabilities of South Asian female immigrants in their cultural negotiation in the diaspora of Western countries. It particularly examines their roles in household decisions, financial management, freedom of mobility, and public participation in the theoretical frame of Sen's (1985a) capabilities approach, which underscores the need to remove barriers to enhance human capabilities and Bandura's (2006) conceptualization of human agency, which emphasizes the role of internal and external factors. A questionnaire survey with purposively selected 45 female immigrants living in the US, Canada, and Australia shows the increasing autonomy of female immigrants in their domestic and public spheres, with their increased financial involvement despite reliance on their spouses in banking matters. The findings underscore the need for enhancing policies for financial literacy and work-life balance to enhance the agency of South Asian female immigrants.

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**Keywords:** *Diaspora female agency, gender role, household decision-making, South Asian female immigrants,*

### **Introduction**

South Asian female immigrants negotiate the traditional patriarchal gender roles and expectations both in their domestic and public spheres. In their home, they face the unequal power dynamics of patriarchy while also adopting the Western cultural values, and outside the home, they constantly negotiate with the demands of the labor market. In this process,

they oscillate between the desire to uphold the cultural practices of their root and acculturate into the cultural space of the host country, which significantly affects their decision-making capabilities and perceptions of gender roles.

In this study, the four important areas of female agency: household matters, financial management, freedom of movement, public participation, and attitudes toward gender roles have been analyzed. The study has used Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which emphasizes the necessity of eradicating cultural, social, and economic barriers to enhance individual capabilities, and Albert Bandura's concept of human agency, which incorporates both internal and external influences in determining individual agency. The findings showed the active participation of female immigrants in household and financial decisions, unlike the patriarchal norms of their home country. They are gaining greater independence over their financial matters and life choices despite their reliance on their spouses for banking services. The significance of this study lies in showing how exposure to new environments of diaspora, educational opportunity, and involvement in income generation enhances the agency: decision-making capabilities of South Asian female immigrants in both private and public spheres.

The existing scholarship of the diaspora predominantly focuses on cultural dilemmas, work-life balance, and family disputes of female immigrants. The cultural negotiation of female immigrants and its repercussions in their agency: the capabilities of making decisions remain a less explored area. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the female agency both in the public and private spheres of South Asian female immigrants. The following section reviews previous scholarship on female immigrants in the diaspora to provide the background for conceptualising the factors influencing female agency.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Human Agency**

Human agency refers to individuals' ability to make decisions and take actions that shape their lives and the world around them (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In a similar vein, Bunnin & Yu (2004), Schlosser (2015), and Shanahan & Hood (2000) define human agency to fashion their lives and the environment around them. Sen (1985b) expands these ideas, associating human agency with "the freedom to pursue and achieve... whatever goals or values one considers important" (p. 203). In his capability's theory, Sen highlights the importance of freedom and individuals' abilities to enjoy that freedom.

Sen (1985a) postulates such a notion of freedom in his conceptualization of development. He equally values both material indicators, such as income or Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and opportunities for individuals to lead meaningful lives in his concept of development. For meaningful existence, social, cultural and financial barriers should be removed to enhance individuals' agency. The empowered human agency is an integral part of the overall development of a society. For the empowerment of human agency, both individuals' personal traits and external factors such as social and cultural milieu, play decisive roles. Bandura (2006) incorporates both the external and internal factors in his

notion of human agency. He stresses that the social and cultural environment influences the choices and actions of an individual. For South Asian female immigrants, these cultural and social factors have undergone a substantial change while migrating in the diaspora. In light of this conceptualization, the study has examined the following four aspects of South Asian female immigrants' agency.

### **Household Decision Making**

This includes the role of immigrant females in the decision-making process in the domestic sphere. It includes factors like major and minor household purchases, decisions about children's education, and the use of financial income

### **Freedom of Movement**

This category encompasses the female immigrants' freedom to travel outside the home. It comprises going to the social gatherings, including religious sites like temples, churches, mosques, and recreational centers like clubs and discos, and visiting relatives and friends. Participation in the Community: This includes female immigrants' participation in social causes and the justice of their community. It comprises their participation in protests against injustices such as sexual harassment, unfair wages, and mistreatment of minority groups.

### **Attitudes and Perception**

This category includes the self-perception of South Asian female immigrants. In other words, their perception of gender roles and other male members of their family.

In recapitulation, human agency refers to an individual's capability to make decisions and take actions to achieve their goals. Sen emphasizes removing cultural, educational, and financial barriers in order to empower an individual to exercise their freedom. Bandura highlights the impact of external factors on human decision-making capability, stating that changes in the external factors also affect the functioning of human agency. Based on these conceptual perceptions, this study has focused on four domains: household decision-making, freedom of movement, public participation, and attitude and perception to examine the agency of South Asian female immigrants.

### **Literature Review**

South Asian female immigrants in the First World, with their patriarchal cultural roots, constantly negotiate with the Western cultural milieu. They are often homogenized as Asian and overlooked. However, their negotiation process in migration and settlement enables them to claim autonomy and transform their gender roles (Pande, 2018, p. 1). Research on them has shown three primary concerns: migration perpetuates power imbalances, migration offers a degree of independence, and the independence of female immigrants can lead to conflicts within their families. The following section critically examines previous studies on South Asian female immigrants.

In the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in female migration for economic reasons (Fleury, 2016, p. 4). This trend of migration has drawn the attention of critical and scholarly studies of the diaspora through a female perspective (p. 4). The primary concerns of these studies are the changing roles of gender in both public and private spheres. Sabri et al. (2018) showed the multiple challenges faced by South Asian female immigrants in the West. These challenges include financial dependency, ill-treatment from in-laws or relatives, and the burden of upholding the cultural legacy of the home countries (p. 443). Martins and Reid (2007) showed the cultural expectations faced by these female immigrants to behave as "homemaker, housewife, and caregiver," which reinforce their traditional gender roles (p. 204). Furthermore, Fleury (2016) observed the various problems, such as language barriers, cultural disparities, discrimination, and the devaluation of educational credentials faced by these immigrants (p. 29). Moreover, immigration can reinforce gender hierarchies and enforce traditional gender roles, even in instances of abuse and oppression to South Asian female immigrants (Kurien, 1999, p. 649). However, several other research papers have questioned these claims.

Other scholars have regarded the process of immigration as a path to empowerment, permitting women to assume decisive roles and promoting new cultural dynamics (Levitt and Nadya, 2007, p. 138). Generally, research on migration suggests that migration in an egalitarian society entails greater independence for females, which in turn affects their relationship (Sabri et al., 2018, p. 448). In a study conducted by Jibeen & Hynie (2012) among 102 Pakistani married female immigrants living in Canada, about their independence and life satisfaction revealed that these immigrant females enjoyed greater autonomy and better life satisfaction in Canada than in their home country, Pakistan. Nevertheless, the researchers conceded the limitations of their research and called for a more comprehensive study to ascertain this assertion. In this context, living in the diaspora restricts or empowers female immigrants' autonomy, which has become a contentious issue, particularly in the families of South Asian immigrants.

In the North American setting, a study carried out by DeBiaggi (2002) and Kim (2016) concluded that the autonomy enjoyed by the South Asian female immigrants led domestic conflicts. They further claimed the independence of the female immigrants not only renders family disputes, but also leads to domestic violence. In the same way, DeBiaggi (2002) showed the transforming gender roles of female immigrants as breadwinner supports family's finances, which also leads to family conflict. Other studies on South Asian immigrant family dynamics also substantiated the fact that there is an interconnection between females' autonomy and family disputes (Kim, 2016). In the same way, Hosseini-Sedehi's (2016) study further reconfirmed this fact, reporting various cases of domestic violence in immigrant families due to the changing gender roles of family. These studies showed that a female immigrant's active involvement in income generation and an assertive role in domestic sphere influence the family power dynamics. In the diaspora, South Asian female immigrants negotiate their gender roles both in public and private spheres.

Research among female immigrants from India in the US conducted by Thaker (2011) showed the link between gender role expectations and the process of acculturation. These

female immigrants faced the challenges of maintaining the balance between the cultural identity of their home and the host country. Thaker (2011) underscored that these females faced the pressure of sustaining the link with the network of their relatives, which poses a complexity to their acculturation process. The typical gender roles for South Asian women, such as a devoted wife, loving and caring mother, or obedient daughter-in-law, contributed to additional stress to acculturation among the female immigrants (pp.43-46). In other studies, conducted by Akram (2012) among the South Asian Muslim immigrant women in Canada, participants revealed that the burden of dual responsibilities: preserving the legacy of the cultural roots and facing challenges of the diaspora. They are supposed to manage their home, including looking after children and at the same time to fulfil the demand of the job market to support the family financially.

Premji et al. (2014) studied the experiences of racialized immigrant females living in Canada and showed that these women faced serious problems related to employment, work-life balance, and family obligations, influenced by intersecting factors of gender, race, and migration. Such a struggle of maintaining balance between tradition and personal freedom can have negative repercussions in their marital relationships.

Moreover, Moghissi et al. (2009) researched Muslim men from various countries residing in Canada. Their research revealed that conflicts within marriage relationships in their community are due to women's autonomy and government policies of supporting women's rights. The legal provisions of addressing domestic violence in Canada empower female immigrants from patriarchal societies.

The above studies on South Asian female immigrants show three main issues: migration reinforces patriarchal domination, enhances autonomy gained through migration, and the autonomy of females leads to familial disputes. However, these studies do not examine in detail how South Asian female immigrants negotiate these dynamics within the traditional cultural expectations and new social and cultural milieu of their host countries. In such a gap in the diaspora scholarship, the present study examined how these female immigrants exercise their agency: capabilities of making decisions in public and private spheres while negotiating between their home and host countries' cultural space.

### **Methodology**

This study used a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach to scrutinize the decision-making capabilities of female immigrants. A survey with a structured and semi-structured questionnaire was conducted among 45 purposively selected South Asian female immigrants residing primarily in Australia, Canada, and the United States. The questionnaire covered mainly four key dimensions of female agency: household decision-making, freedom of movement, public participation, and attitudes toward gender roles. While analyzing the data, percentages, mean, and standard deviation were calculated to find patterns and trends. Sen's (1985a) theory of human agency, which emphasizes individual freedoms in decision-making and the ability to lead a meaningful life, and Bandura's (2006) notion that recognizes the role of external factors in shaping human agency and its performance, provided the conceptual framework of this study.

## Data Presentation

### Demographic Information

This section contains the findings and analysis of data collected through a questionnaire survey conducted with a purposively selected forty-five South Asian female immigrants residing in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The questions are designed to examine the working of their agency, including four different domains: autonomy in household decision-making, including financial matters, freedom of movement, community participation, and self-perception. The following Table 1 presents the demographic information of the respondents.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information*

Age		Marital Status		Education		Religion	
Years	%	Status	%	Level	%	Name	%
26-30	38	Single	4	School	4	Hindu	92
31-35	34	Married	96	Bachelor	48	Buddhist	4
36-40	14			Master	41	Muslim	4
40 above	14			Ph.D.	7		

The majority of respondents of this survey belong to the 26–35 age group, consisting of 72% of the sample. In addition, 96% of the participants are married. Academically, 48% hold a Bachelor's degree, while 41% have completed a Master's degree. Only 7% have obtained a PhD, and 4% are high school graduates. In matters of their religion, 92% of them identify as Hindu, while 4% are Buddhist, and another 4% are Muslim. Briefly, the majority of the respondents are between 26 and 35 years old, hold a Bachelor's or Master's degree, and follow Hinduism. Additionally, Table 2 presents other details of the immigration.

**Table 2**

*Information about Immigration*

Home Country		Host Country		Decision of Immigration		Reasons of Migration		Duration of Immigration	
Name	%	Name	%	Person	%	Reason	%	Years	%
Nepal	29	U.S.	51	Self	76	Study	41	0-5	35
India	31	Canada	30	Family member	24	Job	14	5-10	38

Bangladesh	19	Australi a	19	Family/Husband Reunion	38	10-15	1 5
Pakistan	21			Other	7	Above 15	1 2

Most of the respondents, 76%, made an independent decision about their immigration, which shows the growing independence of South Asian females even in their home country. The main reasons for their immigration were for higher education and reuniting with family members, particularly husbands already living in the host countries. Only a small portion, 14% of respondents, immigrated for the sake of employment. Most of these female immigrants have spent a relatively short time in the diaspora, with 73% having lived abroad for less than a decade and only 12% residing for more than 15 years. The data shows a recent growth in immigration trend among South Asian women, motivated mainly by self-initiated decisions and a focus on educational purposes. After the demographic information and purpose of migration, the following section consists of data about the household decision-making of these immigrants.

### Household Decision Making and Financial Autonomy

The respondents were surveyed about their participation in household decision-making and financial matters. The questionnaire includes information about their role in decisions related to their children's education, major and minor household purchases, and the distribution of both their own and their partner's income. The following Table 3 presents their responses.

**Table 3**

#### *Role in Domestic Affairs*

Who usually makes the following decisions?	Husband	Respondent	Jointly	Other
Education of children	3%	7%	83%	7%
Purchase for daily household need	0%	27%	70%	3%
Major Household purchases like a car, a house, etc.	3%	3%	90%	4%
Spending the earnings of your partner	10%	3%	84%	3%
Spending of your earnings	0%	20%	77%	3%

About children's education, the majority of respondents, comprising 83%, chose mutual consultation with their husbands and other family members. Only a small fraction, 7%, made these decisions autonomously, while 3% depended solely on their husbands. This

shows the significance of joint decision-making among South Asian immigrants in children's education.

Only 27% of female took independent decisions on their daily household items, whereas 70% made such decisions jointly with their husbands. However, for expensive items like cars and houses, 90% of the respondents took joint decisions, showing their growing and active participation in major financial expenditure. Briefly, these responses show that females take the lead role in daily household purchases while both husband and wife collaboratively decide on the important financial matters.

**Table 4**

*Participation in Banking Activities*

How often do you use the following banking services?				
Service	Frequency			
	Always	Sometime	Rarely	Never
Money Deposit	51.85%	33.33%	14.81%	0%
Money Transfer	44.44%	33.33%	22.22%	0%
Checking Account	61.54%	34.62%	3.85%	0%
Insurance	40.74%	22.22%	33.33%	3.70%
Money Withdrawal	30.77%	53.85%	15.38%	0%

The female immigrants' responses in their involvement in five banking services: money deposit, money transfer, checking account management, insurance payment, and money withdrawal show their apprehension in using such banking services. Almost half of them, 51.85% replied that they deposited their money in the bank by themselves regularly, only 33.33% were doing it occasionally, and 14.81% rarely. For money transfers, 44.44% of them used this service regularly, 33.33% used it occasionally, and 22.22% rarely used the service. About checking account management, 61.54% regularly checked their accounts, 34.62% did so occasionally, and 3.85% rarely. Their participation in handling the insurance policies was comparatively low, with only 40.74% regularly paying premiums, 22.22% occasionally, 33.33% rarely, and 3.70% never. To withdraw money, 30.77% regularly did so, 53.85% did occasionally, and 15.38% did rarely.

These findings showed that a large portion of female immigrants did not use the banking services regularly. Rather, they relied on their spouses or family members for financial transactions. Such a dependency may create a hindrance for exercising their agency.

### **Freedom of Movement**

The freedom of movement indicates the ability to leave the homes and participate in different activities, such as social events, visiting loved ones, and attending religious sites like temples, churches, mosques, and monasteries independently. It also comprises information about enjoying recreational pursuits like clubs and discos. The survey asked the

female immigrants about their autonomy in making these decisions and visiting these places, with options ranging from being permitted, permitted only if accompanied, to not being permitted. Table 5 summarizes the findings.

**Table 5**

*Mobility Right*

Places	Freedom		
	Permitted	Not permitted	Permitted accompanied if
To the social gathering	85.71%	10.71%	3.57%
To the homes of friends or relatives	85.71%	10.71%	3.57%
To a religious place	85.71%	10.71%	3.57%
To club houses or discos bars	71.43%	14.23%	14.23%
To work at night	89.29%	7.14%	3.57%
To hang out with friends	85.71%	14.29%	0%

The majority of respondents, 85.71%, were permitted to attend social gatherings, visit friends and relatives, and go to religious places. This equal percentage enjoyed freedom to visit the homes of friends and relatives, as well as religious places, independently. However, for going to discos, bars, and clubs, the percentage fell to 71.43%, with some needing to be accompanied by family members. On the other hand, a larger number, 89.29% have the freedom to work at night. To hang out with friends, 85.71% had permission. These findings suggest that the increased female immigrants' participation in activities related to social engagement is associated with enjoying a significant level of freedom of movement.

**Participation in Community**

Community participation refers to the participation of female immigrants in social issues and causes. This comprises their participation in activities such as protesting against injustices like sexual harassment, wage inequality, and the mistreatment of minority groups. Table 6 summarises their viewpoints on the given statements.

**Table 6**

*Community Involvement*

Do you feel comfortable?					
Statement	Yes	No	Yes, with difficulties	Mean	Standard Deviation
Speaking up in public to ensure proper payment of wages for you and others	70	13	17	2.57	1.08
Speaking up in public to protest the misbehavior of authorities or others	70	13	17	2.57	1.08
Speaking up in public to protest when a woman is sexually harassed	80	10	10	2.7	1.3
Attending social meetings unaccompanied	76	17	7	2.59	1.23
Yes = 3, Yes with difficulties = 2, No = 1					

Female immigrant respondents were asked about their comfort level in opposing social issues and discrimination. Their responses were measured using a three-point Likert scale: “Yes” (3), “Yes with difficulties” (2), and “No” (1), with a cutoff value of 2.0. The mean values and standard deviations for various statements were calculated.

For the statement about supporting fair wages, the mean response was 2.57, with a standard deviation of 1.08. Likewise, the statement about speaking out against misconduct also had a mean of 2.57 and a standard deviation of 1.08. In protesting against sexual harassment, the mean of their responses was 2.7, with a standard deviation of 1.3. Likewise, the mean calculation of their response to joining social meetings was 2.59, with a standard deviation of 1.23. The results demonstrate that most of the female immigrants feel comfortable protesting against social injustices, as the mean value of their responses exceeds the 2.0 cutoff point. However, the standard deviation greater than 1.0 indicates greater variation in their responses.

**Attitude and Perception**

This category comprises the self-perception of the female immigrants about themselves and others. They were asked about their response to statements about gender equality and discrimination, and their responses were recorded using a three-point Likert scale.

For statements about gender equality, they could respond with options “agree” (scored as 3), “do not know” (scored as 2), or “disagree” (scored as 1). On the contrary, for statements reflecting gender stereotypes or discrimination against females, the scoring was reversed: “agree” (scored as 1), “do not know” (scored as 2), and “disagree” (scored as 3). The collected data, with the calculation of mean value and standard deviation, are summarised in Table 7. A cutoff value of 2.0 was used to differentiate between participants’ agreement and disagreement with the statements.

**Table 7**

*Perception of Gender Roles*

Statement	Do you agree or disagree with following statement?				Standard Deviation
	Agree	Disagree	Do not know	Mean	
*Important decisions should only be made by men	3	94	3	2.91	1.6
If the wife is working outside the home, then the husband should help her with household chores.	90	10	0	2.8	1.53
A woman has a right to express her opinion even if she disagrees with what her husband/father is saying.	90	10	0	2.8	1.53
*A woman should not give high priority to her career than to her family.	7	86	7	2.79	1.43
Men and women should share the housework, such as washing dishes, cleaning and cooking.	93	7	0	2.86	1.59
A woman should be allowed to make important decisions in her life.	93	7	0	2.86	1.59

Agree = 3, Do not know = 2, Disagree = 1

\*Agree = 1, Do not know = 2, Disagree = 3

Respondents were asked two statements about discriminatory gender roles against women. For the first statement, “Important decisions should only be made by men,” the mean of the responses was 2.91, with a standard deviation of 1.6. Likewise, for the statement, “A woman should not prioritize her career over her family,” the mean of the responses was 2.79, with a standard deviation of 1.43. Both mean values exceed the 2.0 cutoff and are close to the 3.0 standard, signifying strong disagreement with traditional gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, respondents responded to four statements about gender equality. For the statement, “If a wife works outside the home, the husband should contribute to household chores,” the mean of the responses was 2.8, with a standard deviation of 1.53. The same mean and standard deviation were recorded for the statement, “A woman has the right to express her opinion even if it differs from her husband’s or father’s. For the statement, “Men and women should share household responsibilities, such as washing dishes, cleaning, and cooking,” The mean was 2.86 with a standard deviation of 1.59 to the statement “Men and women should share household responsibilities, such as washing dishes, cleaning, and cooking.”. In the same way, to the statement, “A woman should have the right to make important decisions about her life, the mean and standard deviation were also 2.86 and 1.59, respectively. To all the statements of gender equality, the mean responses exceeded the 2.0 cutoff, indicating strong support for equal rights. However, the standard deviations of their responses exceeded 1.0, indicating significant variation in their views.

## Discussion

The finding shows a rise in the trend of self-initiated immigration among South Asian females (76%), primarily for education. In the same way, female immigrants actively participate in household decision-making, as most of them (83%) take joint decisions with partners in minor household purchases, and 90% of them play a decisive role in major household purchases. Likewise, 84% of them play a decisive role, even managing the personal income of their husband. This shows women's growing role in domestic financial matters. However, in banking transactions, almost half of them rely on their spouses or family members, which restricts them from enjoying financial independence. In matters of social concerns, over 85% feel comfortable raising their voice against injustice and discrimination. Most of them oppose performing the traditional gender roles, bear household responsibilities jointly, and are involved in income generation, enhancing the performance of their agency.

These findings both resemble and differ from other research carried out among South Asian female immigrants. Contrary to Sabri et al. (2018), these female immigrants are financially independent. Most of them spent their income and even played a role in spending their spouses' salaries. Despite enjoying financial independence, they depend on their husband and family members for banking transactions, signifying their apprehension and sense of insecurity regarding financial transactions. Their freedom of movement resembles the findings of many previous studies conducted among South Asian female immigrants by Levitt and Nadya (2017) and Jibeen and Hynie (2012). Migration in the Western cultural context of the diaspora enabled them to assert their independence in public and private life. Such changing gender roles of female immigrants have a direct link with their family life. It also affects them to maintain a work-life balance. DeBiaggi (2002), Kim (2016), and Premji et al. (2014) argued that the independence of female immigrants led to various types of domestic conflicts resulting in divorce due to failure to manage work-life balance. This aspect of work-life balance requires further research. The present study, with its focus on the working of female agency: the capability of making decisions, could not address this aspect in a full spectrum.

## Conclusion and Implications

The findings demonstrate a substantial growth in the agency of South Asian female immigrants. The growing trend of the self-initiated migration, the assertive role in the household decisions in the diaspora, and the consciousness to resist social injustice show the growth of their autonomy. Moreover, the primary goal of these females for education highlights their self-awareness about personal and professional growth. These women are enhancing their capabilities by overcoming various social, cultural, familial, and economic barriers as conceptualized by Sen (1985a).

Nevertheless, their reliance on their spouse or family members for banking services indicates the evolving traditional gender roles, which have not been fully independent. These females negotiate in the third space of the diaspora in the transitional phase of their gender roles, which gradually reject the patriarchal values. The cultural and social factors of

the diaspora facilitate such a transformation of the female immigrants as Bandura (2006), who asserts that the external social and cultural factors significantly influence individual choices and actions. These changes signify a broader cultural shift resulting from the interaction with the new social and cultural context of the diaspora.

In recapitulation, the educational and employment opportunities enhanced by the cultural and social context of the Western diaspora cumulatively contribute to removing various barriers for South Asian female immigrants to exercise their agency. Consequently, they actively participate in making decisions both in public and private spheres. This change signifies both the personal growth of female immigrants and a broad cultural transformation of the patriarchal legacy of their origin. These findings help the government and nongovernment organizations to formulate policies for the empowerment of female immigrants. Enhancing financial literacy about the banking services and promoting inclusive social platforms can contribute to their empowerment. Overall, the study shows a gradual growth in the decision-making capabilities of South Asian female immigrants while indicating areas that require systemic support to further enhance their empowerment.

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