



## Buddhism in the Andhra Region: Heritage, Revivals and Contemporary Relevance

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### Abstract

The Andhra region, particularly the fertile Krishna–Godavari basin along the eastern Deccan, represents one of the most vibrant and influential zones in the historical development of Buddhism in South Asia. This review article undertakes a comprehensive examination of the trajectory of Buddhism in the region, tracing its emergence, institutional consolidation, artistic efflorescence, doctrinal innovation, decline, and modern revival. Drawing upon archaeological data, inscriptions, literary traditions, and modern historiography, the study situates Andhra within the broader Buddhist ecumene that connected India with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The region’s contributions—especially in the evolution of Mahayana philosophy, the Amaravati School of Art, and monastic urbanism—are analyzed alongside the socio-economic foundations that sustained Buddhist institutions. The article further evaluates the contemporary relevance of Andhra’s Buddhist heritage in the context of identity, tourism, global diplomacy, and ethical discourse.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Satavahana, Artisans, Scholars, Pilgrims, Buddhism

### 1. Introduction: Locating Andhra in the Buddhist World

The Andhra region occupies a unique position in the historical geography of Buddhism. Unlike the early centers of the Gangetic plains—such as Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, and Rajgir—the Buddhist landscape of Andhra evolved in close association with maritime trade, regional polities, and cultural pluralism. The Krishna and Godavari river valleys formed natural corridors that facilitated not only agricultural prosperity but also long-distance exchange networks linking inland India to the Bay of Bengal and beyond. This geographical advantage transformed Andhra into a nodal point of interaction between monks, merchants, artisans, and



pilgrims [1]. As a result, Buddhism here developed distinctive characteristics that diverged in important ways from its northern counterparts. Rather than being exclusively dependent on imperial patronage, it drew sustenance from guilds, mercantile communities, and local elites, thereby embedding itself deeply within the socio-economic fabric of the region. The historiography of Buddhism in Andhra has undergone significant transformation over the past century. Early colonial scholars, relying heavily on monumental remains such as Amaravati, emphasized artistic achievements while underestimating the region's doctrinal contributions. Subsequent research, however, has highlighted Andhra's critical role in the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism and its transregional influence [2].

## 2. Sources and Historiography

### 2.1 Archaeological Evidence

Archaeology forms the backbone of our understanding of Buddhism in Andhra. Excavations at Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, and other sites have yielded stupas, viharas, inscriptions, coins, and sculptural fragments that collectively reconstruct a vivid picture of Buddhist life. The Amaravati Stupa, in particular, stands as one of the most extensively studied monuments in Indian archaeology. Its sculptural panels, now dispersed across museums in India and abroad, provide invaluable insights into narrative traditions, ritual practices, and artistic conventions. Nagarjunakonda, excavated in the early 20th century before being submerged under the Nagarjuna Sagar reservoir, revealed a complex urban-monastic landscape comprising multiple monasteries, chaityas, and educational institutions.

### 2.2 Epigraphic Records

Inscriptions in Prakrit and Sanskrit offer crucial evidence regarding patronage patterns, monastic affiliations, and doctrinal orientations. They reveal that donors included not only kings and queens but also merchants, artisans, and even laywomen, indicating a broad social base for Buddhism.

### 2.3 Modern Scholarship

Modern historians have increasingly emphasized the need to view Andhra not as a peripheral region but as a central contributor to Buddhist history. Interdisciplinary approaches combining



archaeology, art history, and textual analysis have enriched our understanding of this complex past [3].

### **3. Early Phases: Transmission and Localization**

#### **3.1 Pre-Mauryan Context**

Before the advent of Buddhism, the Andhra region was characterized by megalithic cultures with distinct burial practices and ritual traditions. These indigenous cultural forms played a significant role in shaping the reception and adaptation of Buddhism. The transition from megalithic burial sites to Buddhist stupas is particularly noteworthy. The stupa, as a funerary monument housing relics, resonated with existing practices of ancestor veneration, thereby facilitating the acceptance of Buddhist ritual forms.

#### **3.2 Mauryan Influence and Ashokan Missions**

Although direct evidence of Mauryan administrative control in Andhra remains debated, inscriptions attributed to Ashoka suggest that Buddhist missions were dispatched to the Deccan. These missions likely laid the groundwork for the establishment of early monastic communities.

#### **3.3 Role of Trade Networks**

Trade played a decisive role in the spread of Buddhism in Andhra. The region's ports connected it to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, enabling the movement of both goods and religious ideas. Merchants, in particular, emerged as key patrons of Buddhist institutions, funding the construction of stupas and monasteries [4] (Table 1 or 2).



**Table 1: Buddhist Heritage in the Andhra Region**

Aspect	Details
Early Spread	Buddhism flourished in coastal Andhra under the Satavahanas (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE)
Major Centers	Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Bhattiprolu
Architectural Legacy	Stupas, viharas, carved limestone railings, narrative relief sculptures
Art Style	Amaravati School of Art—highly refined narrative sculpture influencing Southeast Asia
Learning Tradition	Early Buddhist monastic universities and scholastic activity linked to Mahayana developments
Trade Links	Maritime Buddhist transmission to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia via Andhra ports

**Table 2: Revivals & Contemporary Relevance**

Aspect	Details
Archaeological Revival	Excavations at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda from 19th–20th century revived global attention
Heritage Conservation	ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) preservation of stupas and museum collections
Cultural Revival	Buddhist symbolism re-emerging in Andhra identity and cultural tourism circuits
Global Linkages	Strong ties with Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar through shared Theravada heritage
Contemporary Buddhism	Small but growing Buddhist communities and Vipassana meditation centers
Tourism & Education	Buddhist heritage circuits promoted for education, heritage tourism, and spiritual study

## 4. Institutional Expansion and Urban Buddhism

### 4.1 Monastic Complexes

The growth of Buddhism in Andhra is closely linked to the development of large monastic complexes. These were not merely religious centers but also hubs of education, economic activity, and social interaction.

Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda exemplify this phenomenon. Their monasteries housed hundreds of monks, maintained libraries, and attracted students from distant regions.



## 4.2 Integration with Urban Centers

Unlike the forest monasteries described in early Buddhist texts, Andhra's Buddhist institutions were often located near urban settlements. This proximity facilitated interaction with lay communities and ensured a steady flow of donations.

## 4.3 Patronage Patterns

Patronage in Andhra was remarkably diverse. While royal support from dynasties such as the Satavahanas and Ikshvakus was significant, the role of non-elite donors cannot be overstated. Inscriptions frequently record donations from individuals identified by their profession, indicating the democratization of religious patronage [5].

## 5. The Satavahana Age: Consolidation and Flourishing

The Satavahana period marks a decisive phase in the history of Buddhism in Andhra. This era witnessed the large-scale construction of stupas, the expansion of monastic networks, and the emergence of distinctive artistic styles.

### 5.1 Political Context

The Satavahanas ruled a vast territory encompassing much of the Deccan. Their political stability and economic prosperity created favorable conditions for religious institutions.

### 5.2 Religious Pluralism

Despite being associated with Brahmanical traditions, the Satavahanas extended patronage to Buddhist institutions. This reflects a broader pattern of religious pluralism in ancient India, where multiple traditions coexisted and interacted.

### 5.3 Amaravati as a Cultural Metropolis

Amaravati reached its zenith during this period. The Great Stupa underwent several phases of enlargement and embellishment, reflecting sustained patronage over generations.

The site functioned not only as a religious center but also as a cultural and intellectual hub, attracting artisans, scholars, and pilgrims [6].



## 6. Nagarjunakonda and the Ikshvaku Zenith

Following the decline of the Satavahanas, the Ikshvaku dynasty emerged as a major power in the region. Their राजधानी at Nagarjunakonda became a प्रमुख center of Buddhist activity.

### 6.1 Royal Patronage

Ikshvaku rulers and their queens are prominently mentioned in inscriptions as donors to Buddhist establishments. Their patronage facilitated the construction of numerous monasteries and stupas.

### 6.2 International Connections

Evidence suggests that Nagarjunakonda maintained links with Sri Lanka and possibly Southeast Asia. Monks and students from these regions likely studied at its institutions, contributing to its cosmopolitan character.

### 6.3 Association with Nagarjuna

Nagarjunakonda is traditionally associated with the great philosopher Nagarjuna, whose teachings on emptiness transformed Buddhist thought. Although historical details remain debated, the association underscores the region's intellectual significance [7].

## 7. Toward Doctrinal Transformation

The Andhra region played a pivotal role in the transition from early Buddhist schools to the more expansive and philosophically complex Mahayana tradition. The Mahasanghika sect, which flourished here, introduced ideas that would later become central to Mahayana thought. The Andhra region, particularly the fertile Krishna–Godavari basin along the eastern Deccan, represents one of the most vibrant and influential zones in the historical development of Buddhism in South Asia. This review article undertakes a comprehensive examination of the trajectory of Buddhism in the region, tracing its emergence, institutional consolidation, artistic efflorescence, doctrinal innovation, decline, and modern revival. Drawing upon archaeological data, inscriptions, literary traditions, and modern historiography, the study situates Andhra within the broader Buddhist ecumene that connected India with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The region's contributions—especially in the evolution of Mahayana philosophy, the



Amaravati School of Art, and monastic urbanism—are analyzed alongside the socio-economic foundations that sustained Buddhist institutions. The article further evaluates the contemporary relevance of Andhra’s Buddhist heritage in the context of identity, tourism, global diplomacy, and ethical discourse [8].

## Challenges, Conservation Issues, and Future Trajectories

### 8. Heritage at Risk: Conservation Challenges in Andhra Buddhist Sites

The Buddhist heritage of Andhra, despite its global significance, faces persistent challenges related to conservation, interpretation, and institutional coordination. Sites such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Salihundam, and Sankaram represent fragile archaeological landscapes where exposure to environmental, administrative, and developmental pressures continues to threaten long-term preservation. One of the most pressing issues is the **displacement and dispersal of sculptural material**. A significant portion of the Amaravati sculptural corpus was removed during the colonial period and is now distributed across museums in India and abroad. This fragmentation has resulted in the loss of contextual integrity, making it difficult to reconstruct the original narrative and spatial arrangement of the stupa complex. At Nagarjunakonda, conservation is further complicated by its **island location within the Nagarjuna Sagar reservoir**. While the relocation of monuments was an extraordinary archaeological achievement, long-term exposure to water levels, humidity fluctuations, and tourism pressure continues to pose risks to structural stability. Environmental degradation, including erosion, vegetation overgrowth, and urban encroachment, also affects lesser-known Buddhist sites. Many of these locations lack adequate protective infrastructure or regular archaeological monitoring [8].

### 9. Institutional and Interpretive Challenges

Beyond physical conservation, there are significant interpretive challenges. Buddhist heritage in Andhra is often presented through fragmented narratives that emphasize artistic beauty while underrepresenting philosophical and socio-economic dimensions. A major issue is the lack of integrated heritage storytelling. Sites are frequently interpreted in isolation rather than as part of a connected Buddhist cultural landscape spanning trade routes, monastic networks, and maritime exchanges. Furthermore, there is an ongoing tension between academic archaeology and public heritage discourse. While scholarly research highlights complexity and uncertainty,



public presentations often simplify history into fixed narratives for tourism purposes. This gap can limit deeper understanding of the region's Buddhist past. Another challenge is the limited availability of multilingual interpretive resources, which restricts accessibility for international pilgrims and researchers, particularly from Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan [9-10].

## 10. Tourism Pressure and Sustainable Development

Buddhist heritage sites in Andhra Pradesh are increasingly being incorporated into regional and national tourism circuits, reflecting a growing interest in India's ancient cultural and spiritual history. This development offers significant opportunities for economic growth, cultural exchange, and heritage awareness. Sites associated with early Buddhism, including stupas, monasteries, and relic structures, attract both domestic and international visitors, contributing to local livelihoods through hospitality, transport, guiding services, and small-scale enterprises. Tourism also plays an important role in reviving historical consciousness, encouraging preservation efforts, and integrating lesser-known archaeological sites into mainstream heritage discourse. However, the rapid expansion of tourism also brings a set of serious challenges. One major concern is the risk of over-commercialization, where heritage sites are modified or surrounded by excessive infrastructure that diminishes their historical authenticity and spiritual atmosphere. Increased visitor footfall can place physical strain on fragile monuments, accelerating erosion, surface damage, and structural weakening, especially when conservation measures are inadequate. Unregulated movement of tourists within sensitive archaeological zones further exacerbates the problem, as even minor disturbances can have cumulative long-term effects on ancient materials. Environmental pressures also add to the burden. Inadequate waste management systems at heritage sites often lead to littering, pollution, and degradation of surrounding landscapes. The construction of roads, parking facilities, and commercial establishments near protected zones, if poorly planned, can disrupt the archaeological context and compromise site integrity. Such developments may also alter drainage patterns and local ecosystems, indirectly affecting the preservation of monuments. Therefore, a sustainable tourism model is essential. This requires a careful balance between conservation ethics and economic development. Strong regulatory frameworks, controlled visitor access, and improved site management practices are necessary to protect these fragile heritage assets. Equally important is the involvement of local communities, ensuring that they benefit economically while also participating in preservation efforts. Through responsible



planning and sustainable practices, tourism can support both heritage conservation and regional development without compromising the archaeological integrity of Andhra's Buddhist sites [11].

## 11. Policy Frameworks and Governance Gaps

The governance of Buddhist heritage in Andhra Pradesh is shaped by the involvement of multiple agencies, including the Archaeological Survey of India, state archaeological departments, tourism authorities, and various cultural institutions. While this multi-agency structure brings diverse expertise and resources to heritage management, it often suffers from uneven coordination and fragmented decision-making. As a result, conservation efforts, tourism development, and academic research do not always operate in a synchronized manner, leading to gaps in planning and implementation. A major challenge in this governance framework is the absence of a unified Buddhist heritage management strategy. Such a framework could integrate conservation, research, education, and tourism into a coherent and long-term vision. In its absence, initiatives tend to be isolated, project-based, and dependent on short-term priorities rather than holistic heritage preservation goals. This fragmentation can limit the effectiveness of interventions and reduce the overall impact of public investment in heritage sites. Funding constraints further complicate the situation. Large-scale conservation projects require sustained financial support, skilled personnel, and advanced technological input, all of which are often limited. Consequently, many lesser-known Buddhist sites receive minimal attention compared to prominent monuments. Numerous small stupas, monastic remains, and ancillary structures remain either partially excavated or entirely undocumented, leaving them highly vulnerable to natural decay, encroachment, and neglect. Strengthening institutional capacity is therefore essential. Improved training, better resource allocation, and streamlined administrative processes could enhance conservation efficiency. Equally important is fostering collaboration between national bodies and international research organizations, which can bring in global best practices, technical expertise, and comparative perspectives. By developing a more integrated governance model, Andhra Pradesh can significantly improve the preservation and sustainable management of its rich Buddhist heritage [12].

## 12. Digital Heritage and Technological Interventions

Emerging digital technologies are increasingly being recognized as powerful tools for the preservation, documentation, and interpretation of Andhra Pradesh's Buddhist heritage.



Advanced methods such as 3D laser scanning, photogrammetry, and digital modeling enable highly accurate recording of fragile archaeological remains. These technologies are particularly valuable for complex and partially damaged monuments like the Amaravati Stupa, where significant portions of sculptural and architectural elements have deteriorated or been displaced over time. By creating precise digital replicas, researchers can preserve detailed information about these structures even in cases where physical degradation continues. One of the most significant advantages of digital heritage approaches is the ability to virtually reunite dispersed artifacts. Many sculptural panels and architectural fragments from Amaravati and other sites are currently housed in museums and collections across India and the world. Digital archives can bring these scattered elements together in a unified virtual space, allowing scholars to reconstruct original narratives and spatial arrangements. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of artistic styles, religious symbolism, and historical context that would otherwise remain fragmented. In addition, immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are transforming visitor engagement with heritage sites. These tools allow users to experience reconstructed monastic complexes, stupas, and ceremonial spaces in their original form, offering an educational and emotionally engaging encounter with history. Such applications can be particularly useful in museums, interpretation centers, and even on-site visitor experiences, enhancing accessibility and awareness among diverse audiences. However, despite these advantages, digital initiatives must be seen as complementary to, rather than replacements for, physical conservation. Over-reliance on virtual reconstructions may create a false sense of preservation if the underlying material heritage is not adequately protected. The authenticity and integrity of archaeological sites depend on sustained conservation efforts, including structural stabilization, environmental management, and preventive maintenance. Therefore, a balanced approach is essential, where digital innovation supports but does not substitute traditional heritage preservation practices, ensuring that both tangible and intangible values of Andhra's Buddhist legacy are safeguarded for future generations [13].

### **13. International Collaboration and Buddhist Diplomacy**

Andhra Pradesh's Buddhist heritage plays a significant role in India's cultural diplomacy by serving as a bridge between historical legacy and contemporary international relations. The region's ancient Buddhist sites, including major centres such as Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, reflect deep historical connections with several Asian countries where



Buddhism continues to be a living tradition. These shared cultural and religious roots create strong opportunities for collaboration in archaeology, conservation, academic research, and heritage management. International cooperation has the potential to significantly enhance the study and preservation of Buddhist heritage in Andhra. Collaborative projects with countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan, and Bhutan can facilitate the exchange of expertise in excavation techniques, conservation science, museum curation, and digital documentation. Such partnerships also encourage joint research initiatives, enabling scholars to compare archaeological findings across regions and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the spread and evolution of Buddhism in Asia. Beyond academic and technical collaboration, Andhra's Buddhist sites can also contribute to the development of transnational Buddhist tourism circuits. These circuits link major heritage destinations across Asia, creating integrated travel routes that highlight shared cultural histories. By positioning Andhra within a broader Buddhist geography that includes sites in South and Southeast Asia, India can strengthen its cultural outreach and soft power influence. This also supports the idea of Buddhism as a shared civilizational heritage that transcends modern national boundaries. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy through Buddhist heritage fosters people-to-people connections, encouraging dialogue between scholars, monks, students, and tourists from different countries. Such interactions help promote mutual understanding and cultural appreciation. They also reinforce India's historical role as the land of the Buddha, enhancing its global cultural identity. Overall, the integration of Andhra's Buddhist heritage into international cooperation frameworks not only advances conservation and research but also strengthens diplomatic relations. It positions Buddhist heritage as a shared global asset, contributing to both cultural preservation and international harmony [14].

#### **14. Community Engagement and Local Participation**

A sustainable future for Buddhist heritage in Andhra Pradesh must actively involve local communities as key stakeholders rather than passive observers. Many important archaeological sites are situated in rural and semi-urban regions where people live in close connection with these historic landscapes. By adopting community-based heritage models, local residents can play a direct role in conservation efforts, tourism services, and interpretive activities that bring these sites to life. Such participation not only ensures better protection of the sites but also creates livelihood opportunities through guided tours, handicrafts, hospitality services, and cultural programs. When communities are meaningfully engaged, they develop a stronger sense



of ownership and pride in their cultural surroundings. This emotional connection encourages responsible behavior toward preserving monuments and discourages neglect or vandalism. At the same time, inclusive heritage initiatives can promote sustainable tourism that respects both the environment and local traditions, avoiding the negative impacts of mass tourism. Education plays a crucial role in strengthening this approach. Outreach programs in schools and universities can raise awareness about the rich Buddhist history of the region, helping younger generations understand its relevance to their identity and heritage. Workshops, field visits, and interactive learning methods can make history more engaging and relatable. Additionally, collaboration between academic institutions, local governments, and community groups can help document oral histories and traditions linked to these sites. Ultimately, integrating community participation with education and sustainable development strategies ensures that Buddhist heritage in Andhra Pradesh is preserved not just as a relic of the past, but as a living, meaningful part of the present and future. [15].

### **35. Future Research Directions**

The study of Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh remains a dynamic and evolving field, offering several promising directions for future research. One significant area is the integration of archaeology with environmental studies. By examining ecological factors such as river systems, soil patterns, and climate conditions, researchers can better understand how monastic settlements were established and sustained. This approach provides insights into how Buddhist communities adapted to and interacted with their natural surroundings over time. Another important direction involves the reassessment of ancient trade networks. New archaeological discoveries and material evidence—such as ceramics, inscriptions, and coins—are helping scholars reconstruct both maritime and inland connections with greater precision. These findings highlight Andhra's role as a crucial hub in long-distance trade, linking the Indian subcontinent with regions across Southeast Asia and beyond, and demonstrating how economic exchanges supported the spread of Buddhist ideas and institutions. The philosophical legacy of the region also continues to attract scholarly attention, particularly the works associated with Nagarjuna. His contributions to Madhyamaka philosophy remain influential, and there is growing interest in examining these ideas through interdisciplinary lenses. By connecting classical Buddhist philosophy with fields such as cognitive science and comparative metaphysics, researchers can explore enduring questions about perception, reality, and consciousness in new and relevant ways. Additionally, the study of gender in Buddhism has



emerged as an important area of inquiry. Scholars are increasingly investigating the roles of women as patrons, practitioners, and possibly monastics within Andhra's Buddhist communities. Inscriptions and material records suggest that women were active participants in religious life, challenging earlier assumptions of a predominantly male-centered tradition. Together, these research directions not only deepen our understanding of Buddhism in Andhra Pradesh but also position the region as a vital contributor to broader conversations in history, philosophy, and cultural studies. [16].

### **16. Long-Term Vision: Toward an Integrated Buddhist Heritage Landscape**

The future of Andhra Pradesh's Buddhist heritage depends on moving beyond the preservation of isolated monuments toward the development of an integrated heritage landscape. Instead of treating sites as separate entities, a broader framework can connect major centers such as Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda with smaller stupas, monastic complexes, ancient trade routes, and surrounding cultural spaces. This interconnected approach would transform the region into a unified cultural corridor that reflects the historical spread and lived experience of Buddhism in the area. By linking these sites physically and conceptually, the region can offer a more meaningful and immersive understanding of its past. Visitors would not simply encounter individual ruins, but instead experience a continuous narrative of religious, social, and economic life. This model also opens up opportunities for sustainable tourism by encouraging longer stays and dispersing visitor activity across multiple locations, reducing pressure on major sites while benefiting smaller communities. An integrated heritage landscape would also foster collaboration between archaeologists, historians, educators, and local stakeholders. Educational institutions could use this network as a living classroom, while digital technologies such as mapping, virtual tours, and interpretive centers could enhance accessibility and engagement. At the same time, local communities would play a vital role in maintaining and interpreting these sites, ensuring that development remains inclusive and culturally sensitive. Importantly, this vision would strengthen Andhra Pradesh's position within the global Buddhist world. By presenting a cohesive and well-interpreted heritage network, the region could attract international scholars, pilgrims, and tourists, connecting it to other major Buddhist circuits across Asia. In doing so, Andhra's Buddhist heritage would not only be preserved but revitalized as a dynamic and globally recognized cultural landscape. [17].



## 17. Conclusion: Reclaiming a Living Heritage

The Buddhist heritage of Andhra is not merely a relic of the past but a living cultural and intellectual resource. Its historical trajectory—from early transmission and artistic flourishing to decline and modern revival—reveals a tradition marked by adaptability, resilience, and global influence. The challenges it faces today are significant, ranging from conservation and fragmentation to interpretive gaps and governance limitations. Yet these challenges are matched by equally significant opportunities: digital innovation, international collaboration, and renewed philosophical engagement. Ultimately, the legacy of Andhra Buddhism—embodied in its art, architecture, and philosophy—continues to speak to contemporary concerns about interdependence, ethical living, and cultural connectivity. Its future will depend on how effectively this heritage is preserved, interpreted, and integrated into both local and global contexts [18].

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- **Consent for publication**

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- **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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