

Saivism Tradition in the Koch Kingdom

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Abstract:

The religious history of ancient Assam reveals a continuous process of cultural interaction, transformation, and assimilation between indigenous non-Aryan communities and incoming Aryan traditions. Known in different historical phases as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, the region once encompassed extensive areas of present-day Assam and its adjoining regions. In the earliest period, the religious life of indigenous communities was predominantly shaped by the worship of natural elements and forces of nature. With the gradual spread of Aryan religious ideology, these indigenous belief systems underwent reinterpretation and were gradually incorporated into the broader framework of Hinduism. Vedic concepts of nature worship subsequently evolved into the organized worship of gods and goddesses, giving rise to Shaiva, Shakta, Tantric and Vaishnava traditions in Assam. Among these religious streams, Saivism emerged as a prominent and influential tradition, gaining wide acceptance among both tribal societies and ruling elites, particularly under the Koch dynasty. Through sustained royal patronage and the synthesis of Brahmanical and tribal ritual practices, the worship of Śiva became deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of the region. Nevertheless, certain ritual practices associated with Saivism also gave rise to social tensions, which gradually contributed to a decline in its dominant position.

Keywords: Ancient Assam, Pragjyotisha- Kamarupa, Saivism, Koch Dynasty and Religious Syncretism

Introduction:

The worship of gods and goddesses from early times has been one of the most significant expressions of religious devotion. Ancient Assam was known by different names at different periods, such as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. At various stages of history, the territorial expanse of Pragjyotisha- Kamarupa extended beyond present-day Assam to include parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Owing to its geographical location, Assam emerged as a major centre of interaction between Aryan and non-Aryan communities. In the earliest phase, the indigenous non-Aryan tribes developed diverse customs and belief systems rooted in the worship of natural elements. Their religious life was closely connected with nature, and natural forces were regarded as manifestations of divine power. With the gradual arrival and settlement of the Aryans, new religious ideas and practices began

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to influence these indigenous traditions. As a result, many non-Aryan religious practices were reinterpreted and absorbed into the framework of Hinduism. The Vedic tradition itself was based on the worship of natural elements, which later evolved into the personification of these elements as gods and goddesses. From this synthesis emerged Śakta and Tantric traditions, while Saiva, Śakta, and Vaishnava ideas flourished extensively in Assam. Among the major deities, the worship of Śiva gained widespread popularity among both tribal and Aryan communities. According to the Kalika Purana, Saivism was practiced in Assam long before the spread of Śaktism. Saivism exercised a strong influence throughout the vast northeastern region known as Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa and became the dominant religious tradition of several ruling dynasties, as well as of large sections of the Hindu population. Among tribes such as the Kachari, Koch, Mech, Rabha, Dimasa, Karbi, Chutia, and Tiwa, Saivism was particularly prominent among the Koch community. Śiva worship enjoyed special reverence among the Koches, who belonged to the Kirata or Indo Mongoloid ethnic group. The linga was worshipped as a central symbol of Saivism. The Yogini Tantra states that Saivism originated among the Kirata communities at Yogini Peetha, highlighting its deep indigenous roots. According to traditional belief, the Koches were regarded as Kshatriyas, though in the Puranic and Tantric texts they are referred to as Kuvacha, denoting their non-Aryan origin. Over time, the Kuvacha community rose to political prominence, overthrowing Muslim rulers and the Bhuyans, and established what came to be known as the Koch dynasty. Hinduism became the principal religion of this dynasty, and during its rule Saivism spread widely across society. The Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra mention early rulers of ancient Kamarupa such as Naraka, along with non-Aryan kings like Bana of Tezpur (Shonitpur), King Jaleshwar, and King Bhagadatta, all of whom were associated with various forms of Śiva worship. These accounts suggest the long-standing association of Saivism with both indigenous and royal traditions in Assam. The dynastic histories of the Koch rulers of Koch Behar record that the kings worshipped Śiva through both Brahmanical and tribal rituals. The Koch rulers proudly traced their lineage to Śiva himself. According to the Darrang Rajvamsavali, the progenitor of the Koch dynasty, Haria Mandal, was a devoted worshipper of Śiva, and his son Bisu or Biswa Singha was believed to have been born from the semen of Śiva. Biswa Singha, who founded the Koch dynasty in 1515 A.D., emerged as a powerful ruler and actively patronized Hinduism, particularly Saivism. Śiva worship, along with its associated beliefs and rituals, occupied a central place in Koch religious life. The Koch rulers established numerous temples and shrines dedicated to Śiva, and all the successors of the dynasty, including Naranarayan, Chilarai, Raghudev, Prananarayan, and Modanarayan, continued to uphold Saiva traditions. In an effort to ward off misfortune and ensure social stability, several ritual practices were promoted, such as the Devadasi system, animal sacrifice, and Deodhani dance. Additionally, homemade intoxicants such as wine, hemp, and thorn-apple powder were offered to the deity as part of worship. Although these practices were adopted with the intention of maintaining social and cosmic order, they often led to social disturbances and criticism. Consequently, alternative religious movements gained ground. Nevertheless, even toward the end of the Koch Kingdom, Saivism remained prevalent among the majority of the population, despite a gradual decline in royal patronage.

Origin and evolution of Saivism in the Koch Kingdom

The Koches belonged to the Mongoloid or Kirata ethnic groups and were among the earliest indigenous and primitive tribal communities of Assam, inhabiting the Brahmaputra Valley from remote antiquity. From the very beginning, they shared similar customs, beliefs, and religious practices rooted in nature worship. Their religious life revolved around the veneration of natural elements, which were regarded as manifestations of divine power. Consequently, the worship of natural forces gradually evolved into symbolic representations of God. Early Hindu religious traditions appear to have developed upon these indigenous beliefs, particularly those related to fertility, the Mother Goddess, Śakti worship, and the veneration of inanimate objects. The worship of the linga and yoni as symbols of fertility was central to these early belief systems. Alongside this, magical beliefs emerged among the tribes and were associated with objects such as rocks, trees, rivers, and other natural features. Texts such as the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra provide evidence of the prevalence of linga and yoni worship in ancient Assam. Several scholars have argued that idol worship in Assam originated from these early forms of linga worship.¹ In this manner, the Koches initially worshipped God through indigenous customs and rituals. However, with the gradual arrival and influence of the Aryans, notable changes occurred in these traditional practices. Brahmanical religious elements began to shape local belief systems, leading to the personification of fertility symbols such as the linga and yoni into Śiva and the Mother Goddess. According to the Yogini Tantra, Saivism originated among the Kirata communities within the sacred Yogini Peetha, underscoring its deep tribal roots.²

Rai Bahadur Gunaviram Baruah notes that Lord Śiva was first worshipped at Jalpeswar in ancient Kamarupa. He is credited with the establishment of the Jalpeswara or Jalpesh temple near the Maynaguri block of present-day Jalpaiguri district in North Bengal, a region that was formerly part of the Koch Kingdom of Kamarupa.³ In society, Lord Śiva was revered under various names such as Parmeswara (the Supreme Lord), Maheswara (the Great God), Adideva (the Primordial Deity), Sambhu (the Auspicious One), Sankara (the Beneficent), Prajadhinatha (Lord of the People), Burha Thakur, and Burha Gohain. Each of these names represented distinct attributes of Śiva, reflecting his wide acceptance across social and cultural groups.⁴ Śiva was the most revered deity of the Koches. The progenitor of the Koch royal lineage was Haria Mandal, a resident of Chikanagram village in the Khuntaghat Paragona of present-day Goalpara district. Haria Mandal served as the chief of twelve prominent Koch or Mech families of the region. He married two sisters, Hira and Jira, daughters of a man named Hajo, and had two sons—Bisu, born of Hira, and Sisu, born of Jira. Bisu, later known as Biswa Singha, became the founder of the Koch dynasty.⁵ The Darrang Rajvamsavali records that the celebrated Koch hero Bisu or Viswa Singha was born from the semen of Śiva, thereby

¹ Ramoni Barman, *Asamar Itihas* 5th-1228, pp.61-62.

² *Ibid.*,p.70.

³ Neog, *Pavitra Assam*, p.30.

⁴ Adhikary, *Development of Saiva Cult in Koch Kingdom under Maharaja Viswa Singha 1496-1540*, p.11.

⁵ S.L.Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, p.203.

legitimizing the royal lineage through divine association. Viswa Singha established the Koch Kingdom by overthrowing the rule of the Muslim ruler Alauddin Hussain Shah and subduing the Bhuyans. He patronized Hinduism and worshipped Śiva, Durga, and Viṣṇu, among other deities.⁶ The rise of the Koch Kingdom in the sixteenth century marked a significant phase in the history of North-East India. At the time of its foundation, Hinduism was already prevalent among the people of the lower Brahmaputra Valley. Religious tolerance formed a central principle of Koch governance, although Saivism occupied a particularly prominent position as the royal religion from the reign of Viswa Singha onward. The Koch dynasty, which traced its lineage to Śiva, was symbolically linked to the primitive male-female pair known as Mech-Mecheni. The Deodhani dance prevalent among the Koches was believed to originate from this Mech-Mecheni tradition. Śiva emerged as the foremost deity among the Koches even when other deities such as Manasa were worshipped. His worship also held a privileged place in Ojapali performances, a popular ritual and narrative tradition among the community.⁷ The Koch kings formally embraced Hinduism and were elevated to Kshatriya status through Brahmanical rites. When Biswa Singha ascended the throne, Brahmin priests initiated him into Hinduism and changed his original name from Bisu to Biswa Singha.⁸ The Koch rulers were ardent devotees of Śiva, frequently inscribing his name on their coins and adopting titles such as Śiva-charana-Madhukara in their royal seals.⁹ All the rulers of the Koch Kingdom contributed significantly to the promotion of Saivism. In addition, Biswa Singha undertook the reconstruction of the Kamakhya temple on the Nilachal Hills, a sacred site closely associated with Lord Śiva and his consort Parvati. He also extended patronage to Vaishnava devotees, Śakta priests, and astrologers, granting them esteemed positions within the royal court.¹⁰

At the time of Viswa Singha's death, his sons Malladeva and Shukladhvaj were educated at Varanasi under the guidance of a Brahmin scholar named Brahmananda. Malladeva later ascended the throne as King Naranarayan, while Shukladhvaj became renowned as Chilarai.⁹ Saivism gained remarkable popularity during the reign of Naranarayan and Chilarai. As a result of their military conquests, the northern region of Darrang came under Koch control. Subsequently, King Naranarayan established a Siva temple at Nalkhamrah and made arrangements for the worship of Siva to be conducted through both Brahmanical and tribal methods.¹⁰ Special provisions were also made for the Kachari soldiers to perform their traditional tribal rites on the banks of the Sankosh River.¹¹ King Naranarayan deliberately refrained from interfering in their customary practices in order to maintain their loyalty and satisfaction. Separate arrangements were made within the same sacred space: tribal worship involving wine and meat was conducted on the northern side of Gosai Kamal Ali, while orthodox Brahmin priests performed Siva worship on the southern side. This inclusive policy

⁶ *Ibid*, p.204.

⁷ Tarun Chandra Bhagabati, *Madhya Yugā Asom 1228-1826*, p. 47.

⁸ Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, *Shiva*, p.202.

⁹ Tarun Chandra Bhagabati, *op.cit.* p.52.

¹⁰ Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, *Shiva*, p.202.

¹¹ Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, *op.cit.* p.263.

led to the emergence of a unique tradition in which non-Brahmin priests were allowed to perform rituals in the same temples. The Mukteshwari and Muradeo Devalaya stand as notable examples of this practice.¹² The Sri Sri Agni Baneswar Devalaya, a Siva temple originally associated with the non-Aryan king Baneswar of Shonitpur, was further developed during the reign of King Naranarayan and Chilarai. Ripunj Das notes in his autobiography that Maharaja Naranarayan rebuilt this Siva temple and named the surrounding area Gerd Sandara.¹³ The Viswasatra was established during the reign of Vishnunarayan, a Darrang king belonging to the lineage of Chilarai. Vishnunarayan donated land to a Brahmin named Viswadev Bhattacharya, who subsequently founded the Viswasatra at Hindughola Mouza. Both Siva and Durga are worshipped at this religious centre, with Sivaratri being observed as the principal festival.¹⁴ Further expansion of Saiva worship occurred under King Dharmanarayan's father, Raghudev Narayan, who established a Siva temple at Sarabari Mouza in Patidarrang village of Mangaldoi subdivision. The village was planned around the temple, and an Ardhanariswara Siva image was installed at its centre. Alongside Siva worship, Jagadhatri worship continued under state patronage, while Jagar and Basanti rituals were also performed.¹⁵ The construction of numerous Siva temples and Burha Gohain thans was a significant feature of the Darrang Koch period. The Burha Gohain temple may be viewed as a transformation of the indigenous Braghai-Breeghani couple worshipped among the Bodos. The Rudreswar temple at Mahi village, associated with the Koch community, was an ancient shrine that later received Debottar land grants from King Chandranarayan of Darrang. Brahmin priests were appointed to manage temple administration and conduct worship. In regions dominated by Tibeto-Burman populations, Burha Gohain Than or Sivrai Than became prominent religious centres. The northern Darrang region under Koch rule was densely populated by Bodo-Kachari and Koch communities, and numerous Siva temples flourished there. The Siva Linga of the Tamreswar temple in Darrang, situated six feet below ground level, was copper-coloured and received Debottar land from King Chandranarayan. During this period, a priest named Sagarkhari worshipped the Siva Linga, which still survives at his birthplace in Gowaljhar. The Shalphoswa Burha Gohain Than at Shwetambar village in the Hazarika Para area was particularly revered, as was the Mahadev Than of Sapara, where a Brahmin priest named Vyaskala served as the temple priest.¹⁶ From the reign of King Prananarayan, successor of Naranarayan, Koch Bihar came to be known as Dharmrajya. During his rule, the council of scholars was referred to as the Pancharatna. King Prananarayan earned distinction as a prolific temple builder and constructed several important shrines, including the temples of Jalpeswar, Baneswar, Shandeswar, and Gosani Devi at Gosanimari.¹⁷ After his death, his second son Modanarayan ascended the throne and rebuilt the Jalpeswar temple, granting it Debottar land.¹⁸ The growth

¹² *Ibid.*, p.263.

¹³ Ahmed, *Koch Biharer Itihas*, p.128.

¹⁴ Sarma Daloi, *Asamat Saiva – Sadhana aru Saiva- Sahitya*, p.168.

¹⁵ Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, *op.cit.*,p.261.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁷ Tarun Chandra Bhagabati.*op.cit.*, p.62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.63.

of Tantric religion in the Koch kingdom was also significant. The Kamakhya Temple emerged as the principal centre of Tantric worship. This temple was rebuilt by King Viswa Singha and later renovated by King Naranarayan in 1565 CE. Inscriptions of King Naranarayan and the idol of Chilarai are found within the temple complex. The mythology of Lord Siva and his consort Parvati is deeply embedded in the architectural and ritual structure of the temple.¹⁹ Thus, under the sustained patronage of the Koch kings, Saivism attained exceptional prominence. All rulers of the Koch kingdom actively contributed to the growth and consolidation of the Siva cult. Siva emerged as a revered deity across different social groups, including both the ruling elite and the common people, underscoring his central position in the religious and cultural life of the Koch kingdom.

The Saivism in the Koch Kingdom and Its Impact on Society

The Koch Kingdom was inhabited by diverse communities, each following its own religious beliefs and ritual practices. While the ruling family largely adhered to Brahmanical Hinduism, the various tribal groups of the kingdom continued to worship according to their indigenous customs. Importantly, the Koch rulers generally refrained from interfering in these practices, a policy that served their political interests and helped maintain social harmony.²⁰ The Darrang Rajvamsavali traces the origin of the Koch monarchs of Koch Behar-Kamarupa to Lord Śiva, presenting them as his progeny.²¹ This dynastic chronicle further records that Śiva was worshipped by the Koch people through both Brahmanical and tribal rituals.²² Śiva worship in Kamarupa is believed to be very ancient. According to the Kalika Purana, Saivism was prevalent in Assam even before the rise of Śaktism, and prior to the advent of Neo-Vaishnavism, Saivism exerted a deep influence on society.²³ Śiva was the most popular deity among the people of the Koch Kingdom, and the royal lineage itself was closely associated with him. The royal family professed Saivism, and even the Bhuyans worshipped Śiva. The founder of the Koch Kingdom, Maharaja Viswa Singha, worshipped Śiva at the Baneswar Śiva temple in present-day Koch Behar, West Bengal.²⁴ His son and successor, Naranarayan, institutionalized the worship of Śiva in both Brahmanical and tribal forms. In Brahmanical worship, temple rituals included the Devadasi system and animal sacrifice, while tribal practices involved offerings of wine and meat, along with dance, song, and Deodhani rituals. This coexistence demonstrates that Saivism functioned as a living religion among both the aboriginal and Aryanised populations.²⁵ Among the tribal communities of the Koch Kingdom, Śiva was revered under various names such as Batho, Bathau, Bathau-Brai or Bathau-Sivrai, Burha, and Baba, and was worshipped through Vamachara (left-handed or Tantric) practices. Gait notes a distinctive mode of Śiva worship among the Mech people, which was later

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

²⁰ Dibya Kumar Rajkhowa, *Religious policy of the koch rulers of Assam 1515-1728*, p.49.

²¹ Barpujari , *A comprehensive history in Assam*, p.331.

²² *Ibid.*, p.314.

²³ Manju Laskar,*op.cit.*, p.63.

²⁴ Rajkhowa,*op.cit.* p.49.

²⁵ Manju Laskar,*op. cit.*, p.64.

modified and absorbed into Hinduism. Over time, the Mechs identified themselves as Hindus of the Saiva sect, worshipping Śiva as Butho and his consort Kali as Bali Khungri. While buffaloes, goats, and pigeons were sacrificed by the Anglo-Mech to Butho, offerings to Kali included pigs, fowls, and goats, particularly among the Jati-Mech.²⁶ Koch King Raghunarayan established a Śiva temple at Patidarang village in Mangaldoi, where 'Jagar' was worshipped. The term 'Jagar' derives from the Sanskrit word Jagrit. In front of the Ardhanārīvara (half-female form of Śiva) idol, fifty yajñas were performed daily, while at night the ojas (devotees) sang praise songs known as Malchi.²⁷ Śiva was worshipped in numerous forms, including Mashan, Madankam, Maharaj, Jakha, Burhathakur, Dhumbala, Sonaroy, Gurmira Thakur, Charak, Bhairava, Paśupati, Nataraja, and Gopeswara. Tantric traditions recognized the Mahābhairava form of Śiva, in which worship involved wine, flesh, and ritual sexuality. The tribal belief in Śiva as a god of disease and death was assimilated into Hinduism through his Mahākāla form. Such worship became particularly popular among the Hinduized Koches of North Bengal. Texts such as the Kalika Purana and Yagini Tantra portray Śiva more frequently as Bhairava than as a benign deity, thereby legitimizing Vamachara practices within Śiva temples. Among tribal groups, he was also worshipped as Burha Gohain or Pagla Gohain.²⁸ Saivism significantly influenced social life in the Koch Kingdom. Practices such as the Devadasi system, ritual dance, animal sacrifice, and the use of intoxicants formed integral components of Śiva worship. Nataraja, one of Śiva's most revered forms, symbolized mastery over dance and music, encouraging devotees to worship through dance, song, and performance. This led to the development of the Devadasi system, in which women were dedicated to Śiva temples to perform ritual dances and services. They adorned themselves with ornaments and fine clothing and were expected to remain unmarried throughout their lives.²⁹ Animal sacrifice was another prominent feature of Saiva worship in the Koch Kingdom. Śiva, regarded as a symbol of fertility, was worshipped through blood offerings before the linga, based on the belief that sacrificial blood enhanced soil fertility. Some scholars argue that such sacrifices were meant to appease the demonic attendants associated with Śiva. On the occasion of Śiva Chaturdashi, goats and other animals were slaughtered and offered as ritual meat.³⁰ The Darrang Rajvamsavali records that prior to his invasion of the Ahom Kingdom, Koch King Naranarayan worshipped Śiva according to Brahmanical rites and received divine instruction in a dream. Following this, he also performed tribal forms of Śiva worship at Thana Gari on the banks of the Sankosh River. During this ritual, the Kacharis performed dances, and the king sacrificed buffaloes, goats, fowls, and pigs to Śiva.³¹ Worship offerings also included fruits, flowers, and leaves, along with the notable use of wine and cannabis. The Koch people regarded such offerings as distinctive features of their religious life, presenting homemade intoxicants

²⁶ Rajkhowa,*op.cit.*, p.50.

²⁷ Nirmalprabha Bardoloi,*op.cit.*, p.262.

²⁸ Dibya Kumar Rajkhowa, *op.cit.*, p.52.

²⁹ Sarma Daloi,*op.cit.*, p.131.

³⁰ Nirmalprabha Bardoloi,*op.cit.*, p.263.

³¹ Barpujari, *op.cit.*, p.314.

like rice wine, hemp, and thorn-apple powder to the deity.³² Popular belief associated Śiva closely with intoxicants, legitimizing their ritual use. Deodhani dance, particularly performed by women, was widespread among the tribes of the Koch Kingdom. Despite the devotional intent behind these practices, their social consequences were often detrimental. The Devadasi system profoundly affected women's lives; though dedicated as sacred dancers; many became victims of exploitation by temple authorities, leading lives of suffering and deprivation.³³ Similarly, widespread animal sacrifice resulted in large-scale harm to animals, while the ritual use of intoxicants such as wine and cannabis adversely affected social life. Over time, Brahmanical influence strengthened, and Śakta traditions gained prominence, leading to the emergence of other religious movements. Nevertheless, despite these transformations, Saivism continued to remain deeply rooted in the social and religious fabric of the Koch Kingdom.³⁴

Conclusion

From time immemorial, the worship of Śiva has been prevalent among the hill and tribal communities of Assam. Śiva was revered through a synthesis of Brahmanical and tribal forms, reflecting a combination of Aryan and non-Aryan customs. During the Koch dynasty, Saivism gained considerable prominence and social recognition. Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch Kingdom, was a devoted worshipper of Śiva and is known to have worshipped him at the Jalpesh and Baneswara temples. According to the Kalika Purana, the Koch dynasty was closely associated with Śiva worship. Their predecessor, Haria Mandal, was also a devout follower of Śiva. The Kalika Purana further narrates that Bisu or Biswa Singha was born from the semen of Śiva, reinforcing the belief that Śiva was the principal deity of the Koches. Although other deities such as Śakti and Viṣṇu also occupied important positions within the religious life of the dynasty, the predominance of Śiva worship remained significant. King Naranarayan institutionalized the worship of Śiva in both Brahmanical and tribal forms. The successors of Biswa Singha, including Naranarayan, Chilaria, Raghudev, Prananarayan, Modanarayan, and Chandra Narayan, were followers of Saivism and played a vital role in temple construction and the promotion of Śiva worship. Religion served as a crucial link between the royal family and the common people of the kingdom, strengthening social cohesion. Śiva was worshipped under various names such as Mahadev, Bhairava, Rudra, and Burha Gohain, each representing different aspects of his divine character. Through these varied manifestations, Saivism expanded its influence across society. The Yogini Tantra, a sixteenth-century Sanskrit text, states that the number of Śiva lingas in Kamarupa exceeded one million, indicating the extensive spread of Saiva worship in the region. Among the tribal communities, Śiva was known by names such as Buda, Bathou, and Sivrai. Ritual practices associated with Saivism included the Devadasi system, animal sacrifice, and the use of intoxicants. Devadasi practices were particularly prevalent in temples, where women worshipped Śiva through ritual dance. However, in reality, this system proved detrimental to women, as many became victims of exploitation by temple authorities in the name of religious service. Similarly, the practice of

³² Vasu, *The social history of Kamarupa.*, p.68.

³³ Sarma Daloi., *op.cit.*, p.141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.178.

animal sacrifice resulted in widespread harm to animals, while the ritual use of intoxicants such as wine and hemp had adverse effects on social life.

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