



Exploring the life of Single Women: A Study on Issues and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, women's position has been secondary to men's in patriarchal societies. At the same time, the socioeconomic, educational, marital, cultural, and religious status of women in our society has been inferior to that of men across all periods of civilization. Single women in ancient India were categorized as Brahmavadinis, highly educated women who chose not to marry and devoted their lives to studying the Vedas and pursuing intellectual endeavors, or as widows. Their status was complex, shifting from a right to remarry in the early periods to restricted, ascetic lives in later periods. Unmarried daughters during the early Vedic period enjoyed freedom, frequently choosing their husbands through the swayamvara system and having access to education. But women in a male-dominated society are often single. They bear pain from their parental homes to their in-laws' and receive little appreciation, only because they are women and are born to serve others. Family and marriage are regarded as the oldest, most fundamental institutions, but the customs and traditions often represent women unfairly, not only for the survival and functioning of society but also for the preservation and continuation of humanity. Even today, in 21st-century Indian patriarchal society, women do not have the same status as men. In Indian society, the role of women is secondary across all spheres, including family, religion, law, and media. Everything, such as reproduction, the labour force, sexuality, and the means of production, is under the control of culture. The importance of marriage varies across communities and nations. Horton and Hunt (1964) stated that, "Marriage is the approved social pattern, whereby two or more persons establish a family." As a socially recognized union between male and female, marriage is an institution created by society to legitimize the union and mating of men and women for (a) forming a household, (b) engaging in sexual relations, (c) reproducing, and (d) caring for offspring. In ancient societies, the cultural value of marriage often left unmarried women facing disapproval and marginalization. Under Roman law, an unmarried woman was seen as a liability. Single women were constantly influenced by men. In America, being a spinster was viewed as both a sexual and social unorthodoxy. The tradition of single blessedness emphasized marriage or singleness as choices for women in the middle and upper classes (Adams 1976).

Singlehood in various forms—such as widows, separated women, and divorcees—is defined based on social status. Single women often receive little attention in discussions about women's status. This study focuses on the status and challenges of single women in backward areas in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha.

The number of single women (widows, divorcees, separated women, and those never married) was 51.2 million in 2001 and increased to 71.4 million in 2011—a 39% rise. In Odisha, 57.76% of women were ever married in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). Single women have become a distinct social group in India's rapidly changing urban landscape. They constitute 21% of India's population, approximately 73 million people (Times of India, 17 May 2016), with their numbers increasing by nearly 40% between 2001 and 2011. During Smt. Maneka Gandhi's tenure as Minister of Women and Child Development, efforts were underway to revise policies for the first time since 2001 to address issues faced by single women, such as social isolation and difficulties accessing basic services (Kundu, 2018).

Defining "Singleness"

Defining the term "singleness" can feel overwhelming. Standard dictionaries define a 'single' woman as an adult female who is not married. People understand 'being single' in different ways. Other studies show that singles are often described by what they lack and the identities they have not attained. The Protection of the Rights of Widows and Single Women and the Abolishment of Widowhood Practices Bill, 2022, defines categories of singleness as follows: (a) "abandoned widow," referring to a widow expelled from her home by relatives, left to fend for herself, and lacking the means to support herself and her dependent children, if any; (c) "widow," denoting a legally married woman whose spouse has died; (d) "board," signifying the Widows and Single Women's Rights and Abolishment of Widowhood Practices Board established under the relevant section; (e) "distressed," regarding a widow, referring to any widow neglected and made infirm due to old age, chronic or incurable illness, physical disability, or mental instability, and lacking independent and sufficient means of support for herself and her dependent children, if any; (f) "prescribed," indicating what is determined by regulations established under this Act; and (g) "single woman," referring to an adult female who is either a divorcee, legally separated from her partner, or has been abandoned by her partner. If a woman is unmarried, the term emphasizes singlehood. Singles are adults who are not officially married under state law, and socially, singles are people who are not seriously coupled—in other words, people who are not in a monogamous, exclusive relationship (Glendon, 1989). Within each category of single women, there is also diversity in living conditions depending on their class, race, ethnicity, caste, or age in a given context. In India, the heteronormative family model is still widely regarded as the ideal for societal organization, and singleness is seen as a deviation from normal. The greater representation of single, ever-divorced, or ever-widowed women in urban areas of America results from the migration of such women from rural areas to cities, which has provided more opportunities (Fuguitt et al. 1989:192). Singleness does not always mean unmarried; it includes women who have experienced relational struggles due to unexpected circumstances. When defining a single woman, the National Forum for Single Women's Rights identified the following categories:

1. Widowed woman: A Woman whose husband is no more.
2. Divorced, Separated, Abandoned, Deserted, Walked-out Women: women who were once in a marriage-like relationship but are now single. Some of the women in this category have obtained a legal divorce, some have been deserted or abandoned by their husbands without the due process of law. Others have walked out of abusive marriages, and yet others have been thrown out of their homes.
3. Never-Married Women: Women who are older than 30 years, have never married, and do not see the likelihood of marriage in their future.
4. Women with Missing Husbands: Married women whose husbands are missing for a long.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To focus on the socio-economic status of single women.
2. To understand the life and experiences of single women

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The respondents selected were 'single women by choice or socially created situations' from five different areas in Bhubaneswar. With the research objectives in mind, the researcher selected 50 women each from different categories of singleness. The study followed multiple methods, including a structured questionnaire survey, personal interviews, and focused group discussions.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The present study is limited to single women residing in slums or disadvantaged areas. Time requires a thorough investigation into the lives of single women from different spheres. Future research studies may concentrate on single women living in different geographical settings and situations that have not yet been explored. It can also illustrate the particular vulnerabilities that single women encounter in urban and semi-urban settings, encompassing their experiences in city shelter homes; the struggles of women in institutional 'care' (such as 'mental hospitals' and prisons) etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Single women occupy a marginal position and are viewed as inadequate or deficient within this framework of women's responsibilities. These negative perceptions influence some women when discussing their experiences of being single. The research aimed to uncover the reasons behind society's unequal treatment of working women. This deep-rooted outlook opposes granting women equal opportunities in employment and other areas. Gender norms, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping the interpretation of singleness. Compared to men, women face greater pressure to conform to the ideals of marriage and family since conventional gender constructs emphasize caring and dependence as central elements of successfully enacted femininity (De Paulo and Morris, 2005; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Heterosexual romance and marriage are pivotal to achieving femininity and successful life course transitions. In contrast, goals such as independence and autonomy are often viewed as at odds with fulfilling a complete feminine narrative. The demographic face of the nation has changed dramatically over the past several decades. That is more than 40% of the 18-and-older population (U.S. Census Bureau). Traditionally, singlehood has been considered a transitional period. This transitional period marks the time in an individual's life before marriage. This suggests society's expectations of everyone going through this transitional period will eventually "complete" it. But what happens when individuals never leave the transitional period? Is it their choice to stay? How do they feel about going against the grain of what society expects? Single women have been vulnerable to different types of negative evaluations that may influence self-concept.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women living in slums are predominantly migrants from various regions of the state, engaged in a range of activities. Single women face numerous challenges, exacerbated by the dual burden: being both a woman and single. The study sought to highlight a significant aspect of the lives of single women in the following sections:

Social category

Discussions with single women regarding their community perception indicate that the single women in this research primarily belong to the Scheduled Caste (46%), followed by the general category (30%). The portrayal of women from the Scheduled Tribes and OBC groups stands at 14% and 10%, respectively. Age influences an individual's capacity to earn a living, maintain a healthy lifestyle, and more. The findings revealed that the most common age group was 30-40, making up 32% of the overall sample. The age groups of 20-30 and 50-60 made up 18% each, while the age groups of 40-50 and 60-70 represented 16% each. Moreover, it was noted that older single women are engaged in hard labour at this age to support their families. Overall, it is depicted that neither social categories nor age influences the position of single women,

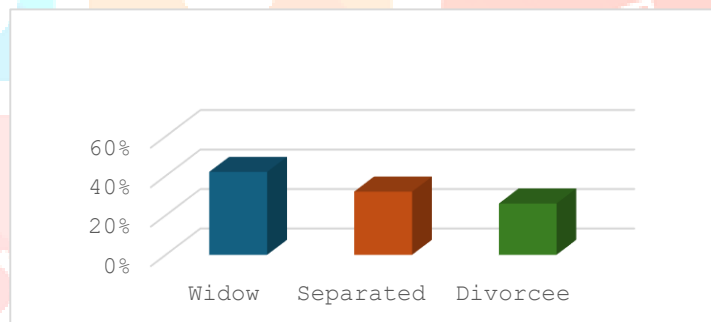
Education

The majority of the sample were found to be illiterate. According to quantitative data analysed, 62% of single women are illiterate, 30% are literate, 6% have studied up to secondary level, and only 2% of the sample hold a higher secondary degree. This illustrates the declining trend of educational status among single women. While the female literacy rate at the national level is 65.46% and in Odisha it is 65.36% (Census of India, 2011), educational achievement among single women remains comparatively very low. They face difficulties in securing a proper income due to lower education. While the constitution has guaranteed the right to education for all, the situation of single women has deteriorated. It indicates that they need special attention in this regard. If they were educated and employed, their lives might be different from those who do not have the minimum necessary opportunities.

Marital status

Recent research shows that 42% of the women surveyed were widows and most of them live with their families, 32% were living apart from their husbands and staying alone in backward areas of urban cities, and 26% were divorced. The data indicates that widows and divorcees are more likely to live with family, while women living alone face numerous daily challenges. In discussions with a 20-year-old married woman, it was noted that isolated women are more vulnerable compared to other single women. Her husband has been unfaithful, and she has been living independently for only a few months since their marriage. She has no children and lacks family support in this unfamiliar environment, leading to feelings of loneliness. Additionally, it was observed that parents often refuse to accept a married daughter who leaves her husband.

Marital Status of Single Women



Source: Primary data

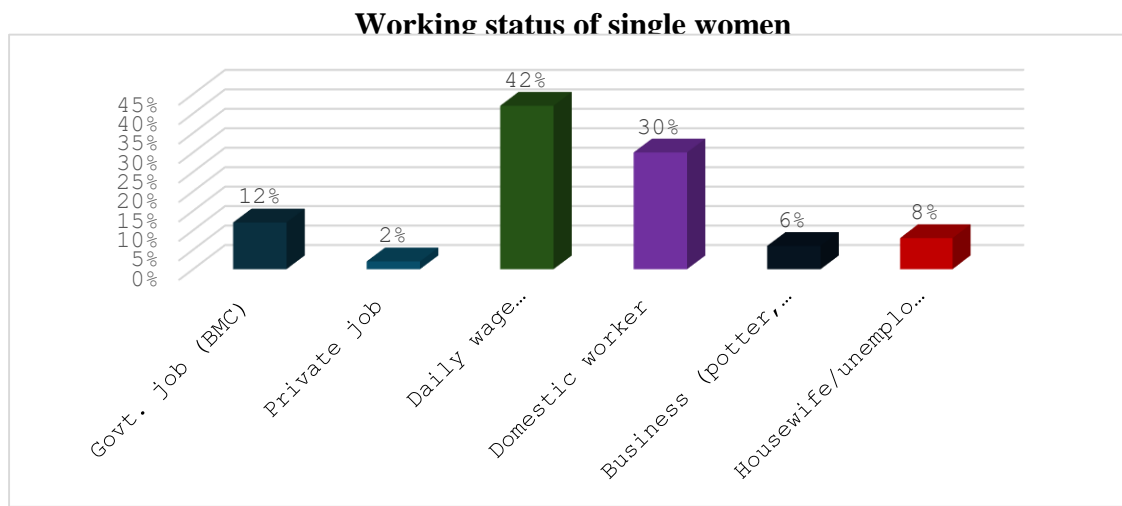
The reasons for separation vary and often involving family or relationship issues. Typically, the main cause is the husband's extramarital affairs, followed by alcoholism and infidelity, even at age 55. Without support from in-laws, they manage household chores and care for their children as best as they can. As single women, they often feel lonely but pretend to be strong while facing various challenges outside. With social pressures and obligations, single women always try to stay resilient. However, a social stigma remains that a single woman is a burden on any family, despite her effectively managing work and domestic responsibilities as a single mother, according to her own opinion.

ECONOMIC STATUS OF SINGLE WOMEN

Data revealed that women are migrating to urban areas from various parts of the state. They face different challenges in their search for income sources.

Working status

Typically, when women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds stay in disadvantaged areas they often participate in low-paying jobs, such as daily wage labourers or maids. Once they have established themselves, they begin to consider more favourable opportunities, such as opening their shop, purchasing an auto rickshaw, or seeking employment with the BMC, among other options.



Source: Primary data

It was discovered that a significant portion of single women are engaged as daily wage labourers, comprising 42%, while 30% are employed as domestic workers for affluent urban families. They encounter difficulties in making ends meet due to their limited income, as they lack a stable salary like other labour groups. Those employed by municipal corporations (government jobs) represent 12%, whereas merely 2% of women are found in the private sector. The monthly earnings from their work are insufficient to cover family and other expenses. Additionally, the surveyed single women expressed that they bear the responsibility for other family members, such as in-laws, children, or even relatives. According to the data, 58% of the sample acknowledge having dependents at home, and 42% have other family members who assist in managing the household. Conversations with elderly single women who are the sole providers for their families revealed that they face numerous challenges, yet they lack support. Some of these single women independently care for other family members, balancing household duties, work, and family responsibilities. However, they remain unrecognized in any data reported by the government.

Issues of single women

This analysis will focus on 'empowered femininity', a specific ideal promoted to women, and its connection to the ideology surrounding marriage and family. The objective of this study is to understand personal relationships by demonstrating how normative gender expectations influence singlehood as a viable lifestyle choice for women. Women from low socioeconomic backgrounds and difficult societal conditions face obstacles in achieving sustainable livelihoods. They face numerous challenges in maintaining a balanced, independent life. Single women struggle not only due to their gender but also because of loneliness. They often lack family support and social acceptance. Various factors contribute to this lack of family backing and recognition. Family members of married individuals often worry about widows claiming their deceased husbands' assets and the financial burden of supporting them, leading to a tendency to leave such responsibilities to their own families. Relationship tensions are not always the only reason single women leave the marital home; economic hardship can also push women to seek refuge and employment elsewhere, especially with their birth families.

Single women face harassment in everyday life, which is a big challenge for them. They face extensive social pressure and criticism in everyday life. Neighbours and family members raise questions about their personal life as well as their daily activities. People also tend to pass comments if they wear colourful clothes or jewellery, or if a man comes to a single woman's house. They face constant harassment from men, who regard them as an easy target. In such situations, even if the single woman protests, she is generally regarded as the one who is in the wrong. Single women being excluded from social functions and rituals is still prevalent in society. Even in their own home and among relatives, they are ostracized and presented wrongly. From the total sample, more than 40% of women who are widows, childless, and

staying single felt ignorant at times. The community as a whole is a place of discrimination for single women.

Issue-1 (Widow)

A single woman faces many difficulties in raising a child alone. Poor financial condition and societal dilemmas make her feel inferior all the time. According to her opinion, having a partner is enough while struggling for a livelihood. After her husband's death, she felt down and lonely. She had to face many challenges in adjusting to her new role and responsibilities. She was dependent on her family for financial support. As a widow, every day she faces problems in leading a smooth and easy life. In other cases, single women work as domestic helpers and are the only breadwinners of their families. Although she manages work and home responsibilities, she fears living alone in an unknown place after her husband. Single women do not have the freedom to make decisions (above 60%) when staying with their in-laws, because societal attitudes toward single women vary.

Issue-2 (Separated)

A 20-year-old girl left her home and settled in a slum in Bhubaneswar. They got married and stayed together. After a few months, that boy left her in the slum and did not come back. He cheated on her inhumanely. An immature girl in an unknown place becomes lonely. She was not comfortable with the neighbours and local people, but she stayed there. While interacting with the destitute, she opined that 'she was having strong faith in that boy, that's why she left home without informing the family, but he cheated on her. She refused to get a second marriage or to go back home, saying that 'her family will not accept her'.

Issue-3 (divorcee)

A single woman opined that 'she is working as a maid and staying alone independently. She does not feel lonely because if her own family could not understand her situation, then why listen to others? It is noted that the patriarchal mindset with its typical social structure is still prevalent in our society. Not a single hand to help single women. It was found that a 65-year-old widow resides with her son and works as a potter and dedicates considerable effort to sustaining her family. Another woman, who lives independently, is employed at a hostel. For 50% of single women, loneliness prevails in their lives, particularly in their personal spaces, as family members often fail to comprehend their feelings and emotions. In essence, those who live alone are the ones who 'do not dare to dream,' as they are overlooked, and feelings of isolation dominate their thoughts. They depend on family for all their needs, including financial support and social interactions. However, data indicate that many are denied this right, as numerous women are living separately without undergoing any legal proceedings regarding their divorce or decision to live apart. In a group discussion, 78% of participants expressed that they were unaware of such provisions and had never discussed this issue. This highlights a significant lack of awareness regarding legal rights and entitlements among uneducated, impoverished women in slum areas.

POLICY AND PROVISIONS

The Constitution of India articulates a strong commitment to equality and women's rights in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Duties. Additionally, India is a signatory to several UN conventions, notably the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Currently, no specific policies or schemes are addressing the needs of single women. The omission of single women from public policy and legal frameworks reflects the deep-rooted patriarchal bias present in society. Despite their economic and social vulnerabilities, single women are seldom acknowledged in discussions surrounding poverty, social policy debates, or even within the women's movement. Although there is a gradual shift occurring due to the dedicated efforts of single women's rights networks in India, there remains a significant lack of social policy research focused on single women, particularly concerning the intersections of caste, class, religion,

indigenous and ethnic identity, gender, disability, illness, sexuality, age, and geography. These overlapping identities often place single women at a disadvantage, leading to indignity, psychological distress, multiple deprivations of capability, and unequal freedoms that hinder their ability to realize their full potential as individuals. The only specialized initiative available is the Swadhar scheme, administered by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

The Swadhar Scheme addresses the needs of various groups of women in distress, including destitute widows. The services provided under this scheme encompass food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, counseling, legal support, and social and economic rehabilitation through educational awareness, skill enhancement, and behavioral training. However, the training offered to women in these facilities is predominantly centered on traditional skills such as tailoring and cooking, with little emphasis on teaching other skills.

The short Stay Home facilities are primarily designed for women and girls who face moral hazards or are victims of familial discord and the associated emotional turmoil. It is important to note that these homes should not be confused with destitute shelters, orphanages, or facilities for the elderly and infirm (MWCD). Although there is no direct mention of widows, divorced, or separated women, the reference to those compelled to leave their homes due to family strife suggests that single women who have severed ties with their families and lack alternative support are implicitly included. The initiative targets women and girls from marginalized communities.

Widow pension schemes have been functional in India since the 1960's. In 2002, the Government of India introduced a new scheme, the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension scheme, which increased the amount of financial assistance given to widows to Rs. 400 per month. This scheme covers widows between the age group of 40-64 years, from families with incomes below the poverty line.

The protection of the rights of widows and single women and the abolishment of the Widowhood Practices Bill, 2022, talk about the rights of single women and their needs. In its various clauses, it was clearly mentioned that widows and single women should be entitled to all provisions enacted by the Government. Some of the key provision are as follows:

- (1) Notwithstanding anything contrary contained in any other law for the time being in force, the Board shall promote and implement such protective and welfare measures as it thinks appropriate, including rehabilitation for the distressed widows and single women who are in dire need of such measures.
- (2) Without prejudice to the generality of the provisions of sub-section (1), the Board shall,
 - (a) conduct surveys to ascertain the number of widows and single women across the country;
 - (b) maintain district-wise register of the widows and single women with such particulars and in such manner as may be prescribed;
 - (c) collect and get verified the antecedents of every widow and single woman covered under this Act to assess her need for assistance in such manner as may be prescribed;
 - (d) work out plans and formulate schemes for the overall welfare and rehabilitation of abandoned, disowned, or distressed widows and single women covered under this Act;
 - (e) give wide publicity through electronic and print media about the welfare and rehabilitation measures being undertaken by the Board to enable the women covered under this Act; and
 - (f) perform such other functions as may be assigned to it from time to time.
- 1) On the recommendation of the Board or otherwise, the appropriate Government shall provide the widows covered under this Act, the following facilities, namely: —
 - (a) subsistence allowance of rupees ten thousand per month in case the widow is infirm and destitute or is having one or more dependent children or rupees five thousand per month in case she has not dependent child;

- (b) residential accommodation free of cost wherever necessary;
- (c) free education including technical education to the dependent children of the widows;
- (d) gainful employment as per the physical condition after imparting vocational training wherever possible;
- (e) free medical care with medicines and with indoor and outdoor facilities as may be required;
- (f) financial assistance for rehabilitation like self-employment wherever required;
- (g) free legal aid in case the widow has been thrown out or abandoned by her kith and kin; and
- (h) such other facilities, as may be necessary for the rehabilitation, welfare, proper development, regaining her lost status in the family, and for maintaining a respectable life in the society:

Provided that if a widow covered under this Act gets gainful employment or remarries, the facilities provided to her under this Act shall stand withdrawn from the date such widow gets employment or remarries, as the case may be:

Provided further that a widow residing with her in-laws or parents according to custom or due to other circumstances shall not be denied the facilities under this Act on this ground.

CONCLUSION

Findings from focused group discussions with single women uncovered numerous social norms, prejudices, and abusive behaviors that obstruct single women's capacity to live normal lives, alongside pervasive discrimination towards them. The report highlights the causes of single status, the elements resulting in the loss of family support, and the specific vulnerabilities experienced by widowed, divorced, separated, and never-married women. Discrimination based on gender is also apparent in the end of marriage relationships, where women are frequently blamed and pushed to the margins in family environments. Concerning benefits for single women, they might face explicit difficulties or not. Research results indicate that single women frequently lack numerous resources, facing loneliness, particularly because of unhelpful family members or in-laws.

In conversations about the future, it is essential to enable women to achieve independence in every facet of life. The phrase 'single women' refers not only to those who are not married but also to widows, financially disadvantaged women, divorcees, and women who are separated from their partners. The decision to stay single and the related lifestyles differ significantly among various groups of single women, influenced by their situations. The present study encompasses all types of singleness, only omitting unmarried women. This research examines the reflections and perceptions of single women regarding different factors influencing their lives through group discussions. It examines the essence of their single status, their views on marriage and remarriage, and the challenges they face as single women. The majority of single women opposed the notion of remarriage, showing a lack of consensus on the subject. For certain individuals, getting remarried isn't regarded as a realistic choice. Unmarried women face many obstacles and hardships, especially in impoverished neighborhoods where conditions are worsened. An examination of different research studies shows that the social view of being single is mainly unfavorable.

This research finds that single women living in underprivileged and remote regions tend to have lower self-esteem, and their future hopes primarily revolve around the growth of their children. They often struggle to imagine larger goals for themselves.

The researcher suggests the subsequent recommendations:

- A specific program or measures should be created to assist single women in enhancing their quality of life. For example, in the case of the widow's pension program, it is not universally accessible, and many individuals encounter challenges in asserting their rights.

- The research promotes a particular policy aimed at single women, offering them new job opportunities and ensuring their safety and protection.
- Emphasis must be placed on facilitating access to land and credit for individual women to enable them to seek joint livelihood prospects.
- It is essential to urgently tackle the exclusion of unmarried women from existing policies and provisions.
- Legal safeguards ought to be free from gender discrimination. It was discovered that when a wife is abandoned by her husband, he faces no repercussions; rather, the woman is held responsible and faces societal discrimination.
- Access to adult education, legal aid services, and awareness initiatives should be available for single women.

A woman has to fight off in the wake of a change in marital status that is perceived to defy patriarchal conventions about marriage. Since the Indian society treats the single woman not as an individual but as someone dependent on a male figure, a single woman without a husband is always denied social acceptance. Without any property, assets, or steady income, most women are forced to pursue work to survive. The harassment and victimisation they encounter in personal and social life also extend to public life, where biased attitudes of service providers act as barriers to accessing government services, legal entitlements, and justice.

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