Leaves of Empire: Colonial Legacies and the Making of Assam Tea

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This paper explores the origin and development of the tea industry in Assam, with a particular focus on ecological factors such as the region's humid climate, fertile soils, and abundant rainfall that facilitated the large-scale expansion of tea cultivation and its impact on the region's landscape. While this paper primarily relies on secondary sources, it acknowledges that such sources are firmly rooted in archival records, providing foundational data and narratives that underpin secondary scholarship. Estate records, tea committee reports, and historical accounts preserved in archives have enabled scholars like Pradip Baruah and Harold H. Mann to construct detailed interpretations of Assam's tea industry. For instance, the Assam State Archives which house colonial records dating from the 1770s onwards, contain extremely significant and rare primary documents pertaining to the tea plantations of Assam. These rare documents provide crucial insights into the environmental and social contexts of plantation economies. Ultimately, the idea is to demonstrate how secondary scholarship is produced with the aid of archival records through the reconstruction of the region's rich tea heritage and history.

Keywords: *Camellia assamica*, East India Company, Tea Research Association, Tea estates.

Introduction

The tea industry is one of India's oldest organised industries, involving a network of producers, distributors, exporters, and employees. It has played a vital role in the nation's economic development. Producing the majority of India's premium tea, Assam's tea industry merits close examination. According to Pradip Baruah, the term "Assam" has become synonymous with the world's finest black tea.[1]

Acknowledgements: I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr Preeti, under whom I studied the course on Global Ecological Histories during my undergraduate studies. Her rigorous teaching and critical insights not only broadened my understanding of environmental history but also encouraged me to undertake research on the tea plantations of Assam, the region where I was born and raised. This paper has greatly benefited from the intellectual foundation laid in her course and from her encouragement to engage with the

The origin of tea plantations in Assam can be traced back to 1823, when English infantry officer Robert Bruce first discovered tea plants growing in wild conditions in Upper Assam. The East India Company subsequently expanded the tea trade in Assam, which was previously monopolised by the Chinese. The British Empire had previously relied heavily on China to meet its tea requirements, but following the discovery of indigenous tea plants in Assam, large-scale cultivation was introduced in the region by the East India Company. The systematic cultivation of Assam's very own variety of the tea plant—*Camellia assamica*[2]—soon developed into a profitable enterprise, thereby reducing Britain's dependence on Chinese imports.[3] In 1832, a Tea Committee was established in Calcutta to assess the prospects of tea cultivation in Assam. Based on its findings, the East India Company, in conjunction with the Board of Control and the Tea Committee, determined that tea production and manufacture should be undertaken as a "private adventure."[4] This decision culminated in the formation of the Assam Company in England in 1839, with an initial capital investment of five lakhs.[5]

Historical developments, such as Robert Bruce's discovery of indigenous tea in Assam and the subsequent establishment of large-scale plantations, are documented in archival records. These records inform secondary sources, allowing authors like Baruah to provide coherent narratives of Assam's tea industry and its socio-economic impact. Secondary sources analyse these developments using archival records like Tea Committee reports, plantation ledgers, and correspondence, which provide insights into the strategies and decisions of colonial administrators and plantation managers.

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subject more deeply. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to my father, Mr Jyotirmoi Kakati, whose constant support, encouragement, and belief in the importance of academic pursuits have been invaluable to my intellectual growth. His guidance and unwavering commitment to my education have provided the foundation upon which this work rests.

[1] Pradip Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development* (Guwahati: Eastern Book House Publishers, 2008), v-vi.

[2] *Camellia sinensis var. assamica* is the scientific term of the indigenous tea plant grown in Assam.

[3] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati, Age 56 years (Senior Manager, Dejoo Tea Estate, Assam), November 12, 2023.

[4] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, v.

[5] Ibid.

A closer examination of the secondary literature shows that several influential works draw upon archival materials to construct their interpretations. Pradip Baruah's *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development* makes extensive use of East India Company records, Assam Company correspondence, early Tea Committee minutes, and plantation files to reconstruct the discovery of *Camellia assamica*, the establishment of the Tea Committee, and the evolution of labour and management systems. Similarly, Harold H. Mann's *Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India* (1918) utilises early plantation reports, government proceedings, Calcutta Tea Committee papers, and Assam Company letter-books, providing documentary-based narratives of Assam's tea industry. The commemorative volume *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association: 125 Years On* (2016) presents archival circulars, minutes, administrative documents, photographs, and press reports from the 19th and 20th centuries, offering insights into institutional decision-making within the industry. However, it does not fall within the category of profound interpretative scholarship. Even early works, including M. Sadir's 1913 article *The Tea Industry in Assam,* relies on government statistics and early planters' records to describe the condition of the industry by giving primary statistical insight into labour, cultivation, and output.

By relying on these scholarly works, this paper examines the historical trajectory of tea cultivation in Assam, the ecological conditions that enabled its expansion, and the socio-economic and environmental impact of plantations. Highlighting the role of archival evidence in informing secondary sources reinforces the understanding that our historical knowledge of Assam's tea industry is shaped jointly by preserved records and scholarly interpretations.

Assam's Tea Industry: Historical Origins and Developments

Although credit for the discovery of tea in Assam is widely attributed to Major Robert Bruce, he was not the only one who deserves recognition for the establishment of this lucrative enterprise. One must emphasise the vital role played by Maniram Dutta Baruah, better known as Maniram Dewan, and the Singpho. The paper attempts to specifically explore the beginnings of the tea industry in Assam, while highlighting the roles of significant figures who contributed to its establishment.

The British had previously attempted tea cultivation in India, most notably in 1780, using tea seedlings smuggled from China by Robert Kyd, a Scottish army officer of the East India Company. Kyd was deeply interested in botany and the introduction of economically valuable plants to India. However, these early efforts were unsuccessful.[6] Unbeknownst to them, tea was already growing wild in Assam, and the Singpho community, one of the region's prominent ethnic groups, had long consumed tea in the form of *Phalap*,[7] and were familiar with its medicinal properties. Their traditional knowledge facilitated Bruce's introduction to Assam's indigenous tea plants through the guidance of Maniram Dewan and the Singpho Chief, Bissa Gaum.[8] During his visit to Rangpur in 1823, Maniram Dewan, an intelligent young Assamese aristocrat, first drew Bruce's attention to the tea plant, while Bissa Gaum aided in gaining access to tea plants and seeds. Another Singpho Chief prepared 35 of the 130 chests of tea that C.A. Bruce (Robert Bruce's brother) had shipped to Calcutta in 1841. Therefore, the contribution of Assam's Singpho tribe in bringing the local plant to the attention of the outside world cannot be overlooked.[9] Furthermore, Maniram Dewan's pioneering efforts inspired many others, mostly Assamese tea entrepreneurs like Jagannath Barooah and Janaki Devi Barthakur, who came forward to establish tea plantations.[10]

In examining these early developments, Pradip Baruah offers a more nuanced interpretation that is grounded in documentary evidence. In *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development*, Baruah highlights the indigenous knowledge of the Singpho tribe, and Maniram Dewan as instrumental in drawing British attention to Assam's indigenous variety of the tea plant. Drawing on memorials and petitions submitted by Maniram Dewan to Company officials, Baruah emphasises that the indigenous people of Assam had identified and used Assam's native tea plant long before British scientific explorations and commercial cultivation commenced. By foregrounding these documents as

[6] Bhaskarjyoti Chakravarty and Hemanta Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery: Indian Tea Industry's Growth and Present State," *International Journal of Business and Management Invention* 12, no. 8 (2023): 99-100.

[7] *Phalap* is the traditional tea prepared by the Singpho community and is often described as the tribe's indigenous form of tea.

[8] Chakravarty and Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery," 100.

[9] D.N. Barua, *Science and Practice in Tea Culture* (Jorhat: Tea Research Association, 1989), 509.

[10] Chakravarty and Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery," 100.

primary evidence, Baruah challenges narratives that attribute discovery solely to British initiative and, instead, highlights the contribution of indigenous communities such as the Singphos in shaping the initial development of Assam's tea industry.[11]

Following the discovery, Bruce established an experimental tea nursery at Sadia. After his untimely death in 1824, his brother C.A. Bruce successfully cultivated the plants, laying the foundation for commercial tea plantations. The British administration formalised their efforts through the formation of the Tea Committee and a Scientific Deputation, which assessed Assam's suitability for large-scale tea cultivation and their reports, which are preserved in historical archives, provide detailed assessments of the region's potential for tea cultivation.[12] Given Britain's determination to challenge China's monopoly over tea, the discovery that Assam's soil and climate were highly conducive to the cultivation of tea assumed considerable strategic and economic significance.[13]

The first commercial tea garden was established at Chabua in 1837, and Assam tea was shipped to England from 1838 onwards. The Assam Company, founded in 1839 with an initial capital of five lakhs, assumed control over British holdings and began organising tea production on a commercial scale. By 1852, under the management of George Williamson, the company began to experience prosperity.[14] Archival materials, such as colonial administrative documents preserved in repositories like the Assam State Archives, provide detailed evidence of these early developments. Scholars have drawn extensively on these records to reconstruct the sequence of events, the role of key figures, and the ecological and economic conditions that shaped the emergence of Assam's tea industry.

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[11] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 24-35.

[12] Harold H. Mann, *The Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India* (Kolkata: Bengal Economic Journal, 1918), 3-8.

[13] Roop Kumar Gogoi, ed., *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association 125 Years On: A Miscellaneous Collection from over the Years* (Guwahati: Assam Branch Indian Tea Association, 2016), 1-2.

[14] "About tea industries," Industries and Commerce, Government of Assam, accessed August 31, 2025, https://industries.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/about-tea-industries#main1.

Archival documents have also enabled historians to trace the evolution of management structures, labour policies, and plantation practices. The recruitment and management of labour, initially from China and later from Indian regions such as Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh through the Tea District Labour Supply Agency, are documented extensively in colonial administrative records, providing insights into the workforce dynamics that underpinned plantation growth.[15] In 1950, the last recruitment was made, and around 30,000 workers came to Assam.[16] Archival research illuminates how nearly half of Assam's labour force historically comprised women, highlighting gendered aspects of labour within the tea industry, which remain evident even today.[17] In the post-independence period, the tea industry in Assam, which had long been under British control, gradually transitioned into Indian hands, with prominent industrial houses such as the Birlas, Poddars, Khetans, and Tatas emerging as leading producers.[18]

Understanding the Rise of Large-Scale Tea Production in Assam

The success of Assam's tea plantations can largely be attributed to favourable climate and soil conditions. Archival surveys and historical agricultural records, although not used directly in this paper, have informed the secondary sources referenced throughout, providing quantitative and qualitative evidence about rainfall, temperature, and soil suitability.

Scholars such as Pradip Baruah draw on early agricultural reports, soil assessments, and the correspondence of Company officials to demonstrate how colonial administrators gradually recognised Assam's climatic suitability for tea cultivation. Baruah's use of administrative papers and early plantation experiments helps explain how environmental factors informed colonial decisions about large-scale tea production.[19] Similarly, Harold H. Mann worked through the early survey memoranda preserved in the *Agri-Horticultural Society of India's Transactions* (1836-37) to show that colonial

[15] M. Sadir, "The Tea Industry in Assam," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 61, no. 3177 (October 1913): 1022-1023.

[16] Gogoi, *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association 125 Years On*, 10-11.

[17] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 7.

[18] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[19] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 24-32.

botanists had already mapped Assam's temperature range, monsoon rhythm, and porous, flood-margin soils and came away convinced that upper Assam mirrored China's famous tea provinces. Their checklist of similarities, including valley shape, rainfall pattern, plant stations, and vegetation, bolstered confidence in the potential of Assam as a viable commercial tea-producing region.[20]

Assam's humid climate has long been recognised as highly favourable for tea cultivation, as the crop requires a moderately hot and moist environment. Climatic conditions such as temperature, humidity, day length, sunlight, and precipitation directly influence the quality, yield, and distribution of tea. In particular, the steady productivity of tea throughout the season depended on the timely and even distribution of rainfall, while optimum temperatures, generally between 28–32°C, were essential for ensuring good yields. Similarly, soil quality was a decisive factor–tea thrived on well-drained, fertile, acidic soils, often located in elevated terrain with adequate depth.[21]

In addition to ecological suitability, colonial Assam offered abundant land and a relatively sparse population, conditions that facilitated large-scale plantation agriculture under British rule.[22] The colonial administration also invested in basic infrastructure to sustain plantation operations, ensuring connectivity, supply chains, and labour organisation systems. Workers were provided with subsidised food staples such as wheat and rice to maintain morale, while annual productivity bonuses served as incentives.[23] British planters also implemented systematic quality control measures, including cyclic pruning of tea bushes during the winter months to maximise output.[24]

Again, the reconstruction of these factors by scholars largely rests on evidence preserved in colonial records. Such archival materials have provided the essential foundation for tracing and interpreting the ways in which environmental conditions, social structures, and administrative policies

[20] Mann, *The Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India,* 5-11.

[21] "Tea Cultivation," Tocklai: Tea Research Association, accessed September 23, 2025, https://www.tocklai.org/tea-cultivation/.

[22] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Interview with Ankur Barooah, Age 42 years (Deputy Manager, Dejoo Tea Estate, Assam), November 19, 2024.

collectively shaped the emergence, consolidation, and eventual expansion of Assam's tea industry.

Environmental Transformations and Socio-Economic Contributions

Tea cultivation has profoundly shaped the landscape of Assam, leaving visible marks both in its historical trajectory, and in contemporary times. Archival documents such as estate surveys and administrative reports provide the factual basis for secondary sources that discuss deforestation, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss. The secondary sources cited in this paper draw upon such archival materials to explain the environmental consequences of monoculture plantations and chemical use, while also highlighting the evolving practices in sustainable cultivation. The expansion of large-scale plantations required vast tracts of land to be converted exclusively for the production of tea, a process that drastically altered the region's ecological balance.

The clearing of indigenous forests and natural vegetation led to widespread deforestation and the destruction of habitats for many native species. As a result, biodiversity loss became one of the most pronounced consequences of plantation agriculture. Alongside deforestation, the heavy reliance on chemical inputs is noted in colonial estate reports and later scientific surveys. The use of inorganic fertilisers, pesticides, and herbicides not only disrupted soil composition by rendering it highly acidic through substances such as urea, muriate of potash, and rock phosphate, but also contributed to the contamination of surrounding water bodies.[25] Intensive monoculture, combined with unsystematic land management, accelerated soil erosion and the depletion of organic matter, undermining long-term fertility.[26] Records of estate management further document how declining fertility prompted increased dependence on agrochemicals, which in turn deepened environmental degradation.

In this context, Pradip Baruah's work offers one of the most detailed archival-based analyses of the long-term problems and prospects faced by the tea

[25] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[26] Sanne van der Wal, *Sustainability Issues in the Tea Sector: A Comparative Analysis of Six Leading Producing Countries* (Amsterdam: Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen, 2008), 37-38.

industry in Assam. Baruah demonstrates that many of the environmental and socio-economic challenges confronting the industry, such as soil exhaustion, declining yields, labour shortages, and market fluctuations, were already visible in nineteenth-century plantation records.[27] His analysis shows that concerns about soil degradation, erosion, and the limits of monoculture were regularly recorded in estate management documents, while administrative correspondence reveals early anxieties regarding the financial sustainability of plantations.

While environmental impacts are evident, the tea industry also played a formative socio-economic role in the creation of infrastructure, employment for a large number of men and women, and provided support to local communities. Secondary sources interpret archival data to provide a broader view of the tea industry's significance for Assam's society and economy. Therefore, it is equally important to acknowledge the beneficial impact of establishing tea plantations in Assam. Stakeholders often emphasise that the sector functions as a "green industry," as plantations help preserve large tracts of land from urbanisation and maintain significant vegetation cover.[28] These estates serve as green spaces, mitigating pollution and contributing to the ecological balance of the region. Areas unsuitable for tea cultivation are frequently left under forest cover, while low-lying zones are developed into natural water bodies or maintained alongside existing ones to support the local microclimate.[29]

Beyond ecological considerations, the expansion of tea plantations has spurred the development of essential infrastructure in remote areas, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and worker housing, thereby enhancing accessibility and regional development. The tea industry also plays a pivotal role in Assam's economy by employing a substantial segment of the population, with women forming a significant proportion of the labour force.[30]

On an international scale, Assam tea is widely celebrated for its high quality and distinctive flavour, helping strengthen India's foreign exchange earnings

[27] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 227–241.
[28] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.
[29] Interview with Ankur Barooah.
[30] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 7.

and bolster trade relations. Thus, the export of Assam tea not only enhances the economic profile of the region but also integrates it into global markets, reflecting the broader socio-economic significance of the industry. In his work, Baruah notes that tea emerged as a major source of state income from the late nineteenth century onwards, contributing substantially to Assam's fiscal structure.[31]

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

While earlier phases of the tea industry were shaped by colonial ecological transformations, the most urgent challenge today is climate change, which has reshaped the dynamics of tea cultivation. In recent decades, climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges to the sustainability of tea cultivation in Assam.[32] While the sector experienced what has often been described as its "golden era" up to the 1980s, the last four decades have witnessed a gradual decline in both yield and quality.[33] Much of this deterioration has been attributed to the growing challenges posed by climate change, including rising temperatures, irregular rainfall patterns, increased frequencies of floods and even drought-like conditions due to significant rainfall deficits during winters, all of which have emerged as critical threats to Assam's tea landscape.

Secondary scholarship drawing on meteorological datasets, plantation-level productivity records, and scientific research demonstrates that rising temperatures and erratic rainfall have directly affected crop yield and quality. Recent summers with extreme temperatures, often surpassing 40°C, have severely reduced yields. Erratic precipitation has further aggravated the situation. Excessive levels of rainfall between June and September often cause waterlogging and soil erosion, whereas the winter months of November to March receive markedly reduced rainfall compared to earlier times.[34]

[31] Ibid., 207.

[32] Rishiraj Dutta, "Climate change and its impact on tea in Northeast India," *Journal of Water and Climate Change* 5, no. 4 (December 2014): 625–632.

[33] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[34] Tocklai: Tea Research Association, "Tea Cultivation."

Although sprinkler irrigation has been adopted to offset winter dryness, it remains a costly intervention, contributing to rising production expenses.[35]

These adverse climatic conditions have also intensified pest infestations, with species such as *Helopeltis* and loopers inflicting extensive crop damage. Compounding the problem, repeated chemical use has fostered pest resistance, while restrictions on pesticides under Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) regulations have narrowed the options available to planters. Similarly, invasive weeds, which now account for an estimated 5–15% of crop losses, present additional challenges. Species such as crabgrass resist conventional herbicides, while creepers like *Mikania* often overwhelm tea bushes, necessitating costly manual clearance.[36] Together, these factors have led to escalating pest-control and labour costs, creating a dual burden of reduced crop output and rising pest control and labour costs. Hence, it would not be wrong to say that the future of the tea industry seems grim.

However, reforms were gradually introduced in tea cultivation to mitigate these challenges. Some tea estates began experimenting with organic fertilisers such as vermicompost and cattle by-products, while also initiating reforestation and water conservation practices. However, the dangers of completely forsaking inorganic fertilisers cannot be ignored, as illustrated by the 2021 crisis in Sri Lanka, where an abrupt transition to organic farming resulted in significant reductions in yield and employment.[37] In Assam, therefore, planters follow a balanced model that emphasises organic methods without fully discarding inorganic supplements. Moreover, one cannot ignore the growing significance of indigenous technical knowledge, which is widely applied by plantation workers and managers to reduce dependence on chemical inputs gradually.[38]

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[35] Interview with Ankur Barooah.

[36] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid. Local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society and that represents regional and traditional farming methods is known as indigenous technical knowledge. Over centuries, farmers have developed the ability to produce food in challenging conditions. These techniques support environmentally friendly farming and help to reduce production costs. For instance, using cow dung as fertilizer; in certain situations, some weeds can also be used to fight off particular pests.

While archival estate records provide evidence of plantation practices in the 19th century, contemporary reports by the Tea Research Association provide evidence of the scientific guidance offered to planters on matters such as soil erosion control, water management, and sustainable land-use practices. Post-independence developments are documented in reports published by the Tea Research Association, established in 1964. These reports serve as important sources for understanding modern scientific interventions, including soil management, pest control, and the gradual adoption of organic fertilisers and Indigenous Technical Knowledge across tea estates.[39] Together, these sources allow scholars to construct a comprehensive historical narrative, connecting colonial legacies with post-independence scientific and socio-economic developments in the region's tea industry.

In sum, archival records of past climatic fluctuations, alongside contemporary scientific data collected by meteorological stations and Tea Research Association laboratories, allow scholars to situate present vulnerabilities within a longer historical context. These records illuminate both the ecological disruptions caused by monocultural expansion and the continuing vulnerabilities posed by climate change, while also demonstrating how the industry has shaped social structures, infrastructure, and economic life in the region.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to trace the history and evolution of Assam's tea industry, demonstrating the profound role of ecological and socio-economic factors. While it is based on secondary sources, it is important to note that the paper has acknowledged the vital role of archival and historical records, which provide the essential evidence for constructing accurate and nuanced historical narratives.

The history of tea in Assam is deeply intertwined with economic policies of the colonial state, ecological conditions, and social transformations. From the early nineteenth-century discovery of *Camellia assamica* to the establishment of

[39] Eloise M. Biggs, Niladri Gupta, Sukanya D. Saikiad, and John M.A. Duncana, "The tea landscape of Assam: Multi-stakeholder insights into sustainable livelihoods under a changing climate," *Environmental Science and Policy* 82, (2018): 9-18.

organised plantations under the East India Company, and later the Assam Company, the tea industry was transformed into a symbol of British imperial enterprise and became the foundation for Assam's modern economy.

Tea cultivation reshaped Assam's physical and social landscape: it transformed forests into monoculture plantations, created large-scale labour migration, and contributed to both economic growth and cultural change. The industry provided infrastructure, employment, and global recognition to Assam, yet it also introduced environmental degradation, labour exploitation, and dependence on fluctuating global markets. Contemporary challenges such as climate change, erratic rainfall, pest resistance, and soil degradation reveal that the tea industry continues to face structural vulnerabilities that echo the ecological and economic dependencies of its colonial past. This study has made an effort to underscore not only the importance of understanding the origins and growth of the tea industry, but also the necessity of re-evaluating its future.

Ultimately, the story of Assam's tea is one of continuity and change, where colonial legacies intersect with modern sustainability concerns. The tea plantations of Assam remain an enduring reminder of how ecology, empire, and economy converge to shape regional histories, and how their legacy continues to inform contemporary debates on sustainability, labour, and heritage. Archival sources such as tea estate records, plantation ledgers, and correspondence underpin secondary analyses, offering a bridge between raw historical data and synthesised interpretations of the tea industry and its evolution since its inception. This illustrates the continued relevance of historical archives in reconstructing the state's economic, social, and ecological history. This paper has attempted to highlight its role in reconstructing the history of tea in Assam.

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