



STATUS OF RURAL LABOUR REFORMS IN BIHAR: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT:

This study was undertaken to identify the constraints in the use of government policy implements related to unemployment in general as well as the review of condition of rural labour reform in particular in the state of Bihar. It was observed that the condition of rural labour is not up to mark because, here one side, the problems faced by the labour class peoples are that Decrease in Cottage Industries and Village Handicrafts, Uneconomic Holdings, educational backwardness, increase in population, Indebtedness etc. but the other side rural labour market is undergoing significant changes mainly due to rising employment opportunities outside agriculture. The real wage rate for farm as well as non-farm rural labour is moving upwards. The movement of workers outside the agriculture sector was found to be influenced by a complex set of factors such as the pattern of economic growth, inter-sectoral differences in the wage rate and worker productivity, government programmes, education, and socio-cultural factors prevailing in rural India. It was also seen that More than 70 per cent of workforce is engaged in agriculture or other agricultural pursuits. Faster and inclusive growth needs special attention to the informal economy. Sustaining high levels of growth is also intertwined with meeting the need of those engaged in informal economy in terms of credit, skills, technology, marketing and infrastructure etc. The attempts have been made to suggest various recommendations to over-come these problems.

KEYWORDS: Labour reforms.

INTRODUCTION:

Poverty is not simply an economic phenomenon. It is a typical case of overabundance of causes and heterogeneous inter-mixture of effects. It is simply cannot be measured by nutritional deficiency or poor income or low level of employment. These are other important social dimensions involved. For rural labourers in India, poverty is not merely a state of 'fixture' but a state of 'scarcity' and 'growth' even on a slowly ascending curve of economic and social betterment. Destitution is the highly accentuated form of deprivation and represents the section, which is not only economically but also socially and politically far below the critical minimum.

In India, there still exist the age-old discriminatory systems like caste system, which is undoubtedly one of the important obstacles in the development of our rural mass. In rural areas, it is seen in more strong position. It badly affects the vocational mobility and individual independence, which in its turn affect the will of earning more in a negative manner. But at the same time, it cannot be generalized that all who are socially backward are economically backward too. However, it cannot be denied that most of the rural labour force is economically as well as socially backward. In Indian context, it is difficult to realize the utopian idea of classless society where all ranks are eliminated and social inequality is completely erased.

Again, the social and moral aspects of this system also deserve the attention. No one can deny the fact that it is completely inhuman to regard anyone as superior or inferior on the basis of caste. It has been pointed out by several scholars that caste and occupation are no longer synonyms. According to Yogesh Atal, "The politicization of caste has been a recent phenomenon. Formation of caste association and exploitation of the caste sentiment for political gains have significantly affected the worldview of the people. They have developed skills in empathy and they are increasingly becoming confident of their being politically efficacious education, industrialization and urban impact have made mobility possible and the number of parvenus is getting larger and larger. The aim of this study reveals that to review the condition of rural labours in Bihar.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE-

Giri, V.V. (1958) in his book discussed the labour problems in Indian industry. According to him, social security measures have a two-fold significance of every country. He was of the opinion that social security measures constitute an important step toward the goal of a welfare state by improving living and working conditions and affording the people protection against the uncertainties of the future.

Suneet Chopra (2005) in "The Problems of Agricultural Labour and Neo-Liberal Reforms" has observed that the survival of agricultural labour, a third of the rural population depend primarily on employment. He has rightly concluded "...under the neo-liberal market life has become unbearable for the rural poor and especially agricultural labour who are the most oppressed and exploited among them...".

Sushanta Mahapatra (2007) has made an empirical survey on "Livelihood Pattern of Agricultural Labour Households in Rural India - Evidence from Orissa". The author has analysed employment generation, income of different categories of labour and the extent of indebtedness and earning prevalent among rural landless labourers and agricultural households in rural Orissa. The author has concluded that the evidence relating to rural labour households and agricultural labour households shows an explicit overall decline in employment both for male and female labour.

S.N. Tripathy and Pradhan K.C. (1996) have made a study on "Agricultural Labour in India". His study has been focused on the agricultural labour system and living conditions of agricultural labourers in Orissa in three districts of Koraput, Phulbani and Kalahandi.

His findings have revealed significant facts.

- i) Agricultural labourers from the hardcore of rural poverty solely depending on agricultural earnings.
- ii) Rural labourers are mostly illiterate.
- iii) Agricultural labourers are mainly employed in three categories viz. daily basis, yearly basis and daily labourers may also be employed for half day or full day.

Pandey (1989) in his study "The Problems and Prospects of Agricultural Labour in Bihar" has presented an overview of the problems and prospects of agricultural labour in the state of Bihar. The factors mentioned by the author include poor production relations, highly inadequate facilities, poor infrastructure facilities, non-implementation of land reforms, etc. The author has suggested for shift of agricultural workers to non-agricultural sector in order to extricate the agricultural labour from the vicious circle of poverty.

Bhalla, Sheila (1998) in her study discussed the trends in poverty, wages and employment in rural India and tries to establish relationship between increase in agricultural growth and agricultural employment.

Economic Conditions of Rural Labour in Bihar:

The economic conditions of agricultural labour are indeed pitiable. They have been getting low wages and leading an extremely miserable life.

- Low Social Status
- Unemployment and under-employment
- Paucity of Non-agricultural occupation
- Unorganized, Illiterate and Ignorant Workers
- Indebtedness Farm workers are heavily indebted

Thus the agricultural labourers have been getting very low wages and have to live in a miserable sub-human condition partly because of factors beyond their control and partly because of their inherent poor bargaining power.

Causes of Rural Labour in Bihar:

There are various factors, which are responsible for existence of rural labour in Bihar, which can be said to be crude form of unorganized labour. In this part, elaborate attempts have been made to focus the causes, which are common for all sorts of rural labour. Some of the important causes are mentioned below:

Increase in Population

The population of Bihar has increased at a very rapid pace. However, the development has proceeded comparatively at a very slow rate and it has not been possible to provide employment to the increasing population in areas other than agriculture.

Illiteracy

The major population of our state is living in rural areas where educational facilities are not available or negligible. Most of the rural labourers are illiterate and are not able to read or even sign their own names. There is also little awareness of available rights. This has further increased the number of rural labourers in Bihar.

Rural Poverty

Rural labour is rooted in poverty. In Bihar, near about 80 percent of the total population still lives in the rural area and about 50 percent population subsists below poverty line. Poverty is a complex phenomenon as a host of factors such as age, sex, education, employment characteristics, wage rates, etc. is at work as its causes. While in some cases of rural labour, a single factor might account for low income but in other cases, a number of factors can be identified as causes of poverty.

Educational Backwardness

The prevalence of educational backwardness is also one of the major causes of rural labour in Bihar where low investment in human being exists. Education involves money outlay and people being poor and caught in vicious circle of poverty can afford little investment in education. Therefore while discussing the causes of rural labourers, educational backwardness can be cited as one of the foremost reasons.

Unemployment

One of the major causes of the shortfall in job creation is decline in employment elasticity in major sectors: agriculture, manufacturing and services. Apart from this, the poor section of the society wants some loans or money from their employers to meet out their family problems and to avoid starvation. Employers also want to advance the money to their employees with a view to exploit them and take work from the employees according to their wish, wants and desires.

Decrease in Cottage Industries and Village Handicrafts

There was a rapid decline of cottage industries and village handicrafts during the British period but modern industries were not set up to take their places. The Britishers had adopted various measures to destroy the traditional industries of India and they were least interested in providing alternative employment opportunities to the skilled and unskilled workers engaged in these industries. Not only the craftsmen working in industrial cities became jobless but also the craftsmen engaged in small towns lost their jobs. These people were forced to seek employment as rural workers in the countryside.

Wage Problems

Low wages are also responsible for increasing the number of rural labourers in Bihar and particularly Patna District. Employers are openly violating the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 especially in the rural sector and make payment of wages much below the minimum wage. In order to preserve employment, the rural workers have absolutely no option but to accept the low wages. In these circumstances, children also join employment to supplement the family income, which results in increase in the number of rural labourers.

Indebtedness

The increasing indebtedness of rural labourers in rural areas is also responsible for increasing the number of rural workers. The money-lenders and mahajans often give loans with purpose of grabbing the land of small farmers. They adopt various malpractices like charging exorbitant rates of interest, manipulation of accounts, etc. Thus, the erstwhile farmers are reduced to the status of agricultural or rural labourers. Further, the persons belonging to the rich class are the major beneficiaries of economic growth.

Uneconomic Holdings

The process of sub-division and fragmentation holding (which is mainly a consequence of the law of inheritance and decline of joint family system) has continued unabated for a long period of time. This has rendered a large number of holdings uneconomic. As a consequence, farmers working on these holdings find it difficult to make both ends meet. Therefore, they are forced to work on the farms of big landlords as agriculture labourers to supplement their income from land.

Agrarian Social Status

Indian society continues to be essentially agrarian in character and a recognized feature of rural employment is its seasonality. During the peak sowing and harvesting season, there is tremendous demand for labour. In order to earn the maximum possible income, almost every rural labour household mobilizes the entire family labour force, including children to contribute, howsoever insignificantly, towards family income. Increasing landlessness among the rural households is also responsible for child labour in the rural sector particularly in agricultural sector.

Capitalist Agriculture

Because of a multiplicity of factors operating in the state from decades, capitalist agriculture has received a big boost. Abolition of intermediaries, technological developments in agriculture, cheap co-operative credit, expansion of marketing facilities and the pricing policy of the government have all created favorable condition for the development of capitalist agriculture. It has entrenched itself deeply in various districts of Bihar. The farmers turned entrepreneurs of these areas has adopted capitalist farming on a large scale and have started attracting agricultural workers from far of places. This possibility cannot be ruled out in the future and development of capitalist farming may force more and more tenants to leave land and start working as agricultural or rural labourers.

Industrialization and Urbanization

Though India is among the first ten in terms of industrialization, she is also among the poorest in terms of per capita income. Expensive urban living and low wages compelled the children to take up industrial employment in order to support meagre family income. Due to these appalling circumstances, they have to work even below the minimum wage so that they may avoid the situation of starvation in their family.

Low Social Status

Most rural labourers of Bihar belong to the depressed classes which have been neglected for ages. The low caste and depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they had never the courage to assert themselves. They have been like dum-driven cattle.

Paucity of Non-agricultural Jobs

Paucity of non-agricultural occupations in rural areas of Bihar is another factor for poor economic condition of rural labour. Absence of other occupations in rural areas and lack of inter-regional mobility have been responsible for worsening the pressure of population on land.

Unorganised

Rural labourers of Bihar are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages and hence, they cannot easily be organized. It is difficult for them to bargain with land owners and secure good wages through negotiations.

Challenges of Rural Labour and Labour Market in Bihar:

Rural labours and labour market in India in general and Bihar in particular have been suffering from various composite issues. Although the size of labour market is quite wide but it has been suffering from diverse problems. Following are some of these major problems faced by labour market in the state:

Surplus Labour Force: The labour market in Bihar is suffering from surplus labour market. A huge number of rural labourers are rendered surplus due to lack of adequate demand arising out of primary, secondary and tertiary sector. Due to high rate of growth of population, a large number of labour force especially rural labour is continuously being added with the existing labour force leading to a huge surplus in the labour market.

Unskilled Labour: There is large number of unskilled rural labourers in the state. In the absence of adequate vocational institutes, skill formation among labour force is very slow. This huge number of unskilled labourers find it difficult to become self-employed and thus create huge army of unemployed in the state.

Lack of Absorption of Skilled Labour: The distraction rate of skilled labour force is poor in Bihar. A large number of technically educated youths after completing their technical education are finding it difficult to get them absorbed.

Imperfections: Labour market in Bihar is also suffering from imperfections such as lack of adequate information regarding jobs, lack of suitable agencies for utilization of labour force, child labour practices, lack of proper manpower planning, etc. Such imperfections have created hurdles in the path of absorption of labour force smoothly.

Work Culture: Work culture among labour force in Bihar is also one of the greatest obstacles. Whatever work force is absorbed is not adhered to healthy work culture. This has been resulting in lesser economic surplus in the production system which restricts indirectly its absorption capacity in future.

Unemployment: A large number of work forces of our state remain partially or wholly unemployed throughout the year. This has led to the problems like disguised unemployment, seasonal unemployment, general unemployment and educated unemployment. In the absence of adequate growth of employment avenues, unemployment problem in the country is step by step more alarming day by day.

Lack of Labour Reforms: Economic reforms introduced in the country during nineties have changed economic scenario of the country. But Bihar is lagging behind in adopting necessary labour reforms which are important in recent context.

Labour Resource in Bihar:

According to 2011 Census, the Work Participation Rate (WPR), defined as the proportion of workers (main and marginal) to total population was 33.4 percent in Bihar, compared to 39.8 percent in whole of India (Table 1.1). The WPR in the age group of 15-59 years is 54.5 percent in Bihar which is 4.0 percentage points lower than that of India (58.5 percent). Remarkably, work participation of aged population (60+ years) is 9.1 percentage points higher in Bihar, compared to that of India. However, regarding the child labour, the share for both India and Bihar lie between 3 to 4 percent. Between 2001 and 2011, there has been notable decrease in the share of main workers, with an increase in the share of marginal workers. This trend is observed both in Bihar and the entire country.

Table-1.1: Age-wise Work Participation Rates (WPR) in India and Bihar
(Percentage)

Age Group	2001			2011			Increase / Decrease (2001 to 2011)		
	Total	Main	Marginal	Total	Main	Marginal	Total	Main	Marginal
India									
5 - 14 years	5.0	2.3	2.7	3.9	1.7	2.2	-1.1	-0.6	-0.5
15 - 59 years	61.1	48.1	13.0	58.5	44.4	14.0	-2.6	-3.7	1.1
60+ years	40.3	32.1	8.2	41.6	31.4	10.2	1.3	-0.7	2.0
Age Not Stated	31.1	24.2	6.9	36.0	26.2	9.7	4.9	2.1	2.8
All age	39.1	30.4	8.7	39.8	29.9	9.9	0.7	-0.5	1.2
Bihar									
5 - 14 years	4.7	2.3	2.4	3.8	1.6	2.2	-0.9	-0.7	-0.2
15 year-59 years	57.2	43.4	13.8	54.5	33.7	20.8	-2.6	-9.6	7.0
60+ years	46.3	37.5	8.9	50.7	32.6	18.1	4.4	-4.9	9.3
Age Not Stated	24.5	18.9	5.6	33.3	20.5	12.8	8.8	1.6	7.2
All Age	33.7	25.4	8.3	33.4	20.5	12.8	-0.3	-4.8	4.5

Source: Census of India and GoB, Economic Survey (2016-17), Table 10.36, p. 310.

Labour Policy in India & their implementation:

Now, we are going to discuss relevant aspects of international labour standards and the position of India. Regarding labour standards. India is a founder member of the ILO. India has ratified 37 of the 181 conventions. The government of India has ratified some conventions such as hours of work industry convention 1919, night work (women) convention 1919, minimum age convention 1919, Right to Association (Agricultural workers), workmen's compensation, 1925, Equal Remuneration convention 1951, (Venata Ratam, 1998). However, freedom of association and Right to collective bargaining (convention No.87 and 98) both conventions are not ratified by India due to technical difficulties involving trade union rights for civil servants. Freedom of Association is guaranteed as a fundamental right in the Indian constitution, Trade Union Act 1926 meets with part of the objectives of the convention.

The Indian Constitution, (GOI, 1991) upholds the principle equality between men and women. Laws have enacted fixing the hours and minimum wages of labourers and to improve their living conditions. Various security schemes have been framed. Besides, there are various labour laws, like Trade Union Act 1926, The Minimum Wages Act 1948, Employees State Insurance Act 1948, Industrial

Disputes Act 1949, Industrial Disputes Decision Act 1955, Payment of Bonus Act 1955, Personal Injuries, (compensation insurance) Act 1963, Maternity Benefits Act 1967, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970, Bonded labour Systems (Abolition) Act 1976, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment) Conditions of Service Act 1979, The Child Labour (prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 etc. However, these labour laws and policies are applicable for workers in the organized sector only. What is the present position of unorganized workers India? Have they got basic rights of labour as per labour standards in India? Have they protected by various labour laws in India? What is status of migrant workers in India? These are main issues of unorganized workers in India. They constitute 92 percent of the total workforce in the country.

Government Measures Pertaining to Rural Labour:

➤ Declaring Serfdom an Offence:

Our Constitution has declared the practice of serfdom an offence. It has abolished agrarian slavery including forced labour by law but it will take some time before it is removed in practice.

Since 1947, the Centre as well as the States has taken measures to increase the wages of farm labour and to improve their economic and social conditions. They include the passing of legislation to fix minimum wages for farm labour, the removal of disabilities, the ceiling on holdings and the redistribution of land among the landless labourers, etc.

➤ Passing of Minimum Wages Act, 1948:

An important step taken by (the Government is the passing of the Minimum Wages Act in 1948 under which farm workers will have to be paid a minimum wage. The minimum wages are fixed keeping, in view the local costs and standard of living, they vary between 66 paise to Rs. 150 per day.

Since conditions in various parts of the country are different and since even within a State the law allows different rates of wages, to be fixed, in practice, it is very difficult to enforce minimum wages effectively. Fortunately, the inflationary situation has pushed up wages for farm workers.

➤ Land Reforms:

Various land reforms have been passed by the Government which aims at bettering the economic position of agricultural labourers. For instance, with the abolition of the zamindari system all the exploitation associated with the system has been removed. Tenancy laws have been passed in most of the States protecting the interests of the tenants and labourers, and enabling them to acquire the lands they cultivate.

Every State has passed law fixing ceiling on agricultural holdings by which the maximum amount of land which a person can hold has been fixed by law, the surplus lands of rich landowners are to be distributed to the landless labourers, and small peasants.

➤ Labour Co-operatives:

After Independence, efforts have been made to encourage the formation of labour co-operatives. These co-operatives, whose members are workers, undertake the contract of govt. projects, such as, construction of roads, digging of canals and tanks, a forestation, etc.

They provide employment to farm workers during off-seasons and also eliminate that possible exploitation of workers by the private contractors. The basic idea of the movement is commendable. The movement has yet to gain momentum in the rural areas.

➤ Employment Guarantee Scheme:

The Govt. of Bihar has introduced the 'Employment Guarantee Scheme' under which any able-bodied person in rural areas can apply for a job to the Collector of his district or to his authorised subordinate official and the latter will provide him employment within 5 kms of his place of residence. For this purpose, the Government has to prepare and keep in readiness various public works, such as irrigation works, road construction, etc.

The rate of wages will not be such as to attract agricultural workers from their normal employment in agricultural operations. This is a welcome step to provide employment to all persons and it is expected that all other states would introduce similar schemes.

➤ **20-Point Programme:**

In July, 1975, soon after the Emergency was declared, the Government introduced the 20-point economic programme which included a number of measures to improve the economic condition of the landless workers and other weaker sections of the community in our villages.

These measures were:

- (i) Speedy implementation of ceiling legislation and distribution of surplus land among landless labourers and small peasants;
- (ii) Provision of house sites for landless labourers and conferment of ownership rights of the houses if they have been occupying them for a certain period;
- (iii) Abolition of bonded labour;
- (iv) Liquidation of rural indebtedness and moratorium on recovery of debts from landless labourers, artisans and small peasants; and
- (v) Review of the minimum wage legislation for agricultural labour and introduction of suitable enhancement of minimum wages wherever necessary.

The Planning Commission has rightly felt that the benefits of many of the development programmes have not reached the landless farm labour. They, therefore, have suggested the formation of a board in each State to co-ordinate all measures proposed for the benefit of farm workers.

The co-ordination should take place at the level of a community development block, at the district and at higher levels. Further, the Planning Commission has decided to set up a Central Advisory Committee to advise the Commission on problems of landless labour in general and on the problem of settling them on land in particular.

The actual outcome for most of them has probably remained confined to getting some supplementary employment and access to PDS supplies. It is instructive to see how this limitation came about. As the facts are well-known, it would be enough to take note of the highlights briefly listed below.

1. Very little land has been redistributed under the ceiling legislation; even when land was available, as in Bhoodan programme, the process of distribution was slow; it is doubtful that the recipients got enough land (along with credit, inputs, extension advice, etc.) to become viable cultivators.
2. Programmes like IRDP and TRYSEM appear to have helped the middle strata household rather than the poor because of the handicaps of the latter, especially the labourer, in taking up self-employment activities.
3. In programmes for education, health, housing, etc., targets for coverage of villages and households were achieved without regard to crucial aspects like quality, regularity, compatibility with needs of intended beneficiaries and measures to motivate and prepare them to benefit from these programmes. It is also likely that the poor develop a desire for the benefits of these programmes only when their income reaches a threshold level and their absorptive capacity improves. On the whole, it would be reasonable to assume that very limited number of poor must have received substantive and enduring benefits of these programmes.
4. Given their present status, it is only to be expected that the rural labourers would remain on the periphery of organizations like cooperatives with meagre scope to benefit from their operations. Paradoxically, the intervention and control by the government seem to increase even further the hold of rural rich on these organisations.
5. In principle, employment programmes undertaken on an adequate scale to provide guarantee of employment and to mobilise the surplus labour for carrying out activities to conserve and improve rural resource base could trigger a sequential process of development covering all sections of rural society. However, the actual scale of these programmes remained far too modest to give rise to such a process.

The main lesson to be drawn from this experience is that the impact of policies for rural labourer implemented so far has not gone much beyond providing them a measure of relief. It is probably true that even with a vast bureaucracy and huge funds at its disposal; a central authority is unable to effectively implement structural change policies in the prevailing socio-economic environment

may be in the process of becoming more favourable to policies for structural change. The next section describes these trends and changes.

A word must be said at this point about the "upper strata" to indicate the dilemma they pose to the policy-maker. The period since Independence has witnessed the emergence of a substantial middle stratum in rural communities consisting of people whose parents/grandparents were poor or near-poor and who themselves are now on the verge of becoming modestly well-to-do, still far from being affluent.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION-

Many suggestions have been put forth for the improvement of farm workers which are as follows:

(1) Abolition of Agricultural Slavery:

According to our Constitution the practice of slavery in any form is not permissible. Agricultural slavery which exists in many parts of India will have to go. Agrarian serfdom which has been in vogue for centuries cannot go so easily.

This is so because the workers are helpless, ignorant and illiterate. Education of the rural masses and better opportunities are some of the remedies for the removal of the system of agricultural slavery. When the lower classes are sufficiently educated and made conscious of their rights, they will fight certainly against slavery.

(2) Minimum Agricultural Wages:

Measures should be taken, to enhance the wages of farm workers. Unless this is done it is not possible to raise their economic condition. Rural labours have been getting very low wages except in Punjab. Minimum Wages Act has been passed in most of the States. There are limitations in properly enforcing them. Minimum legislation alone is not sufficient but steps should be taken to enforce it.

(3) Provision of Land:

The basic difficulty is that most of our agricultural labourers do not have any land of their own. To improve their condition, the landless workers should be provided with land. One way is to allot to them the newly reclaimed land. Another way is to redistribute the existing land among all people either on a voluntary basis or by using a certain amount of compulsion.

Ceiling of landholding serves this purpose. The Bhoodan movement is also one of the methods by which those who possess land, contribute voluntarily for those who do not possess any land. Another method is co-operative farming. The landless labourers can improve their lot only through acquiring land.

(4) Co-operative Fanning:

The measures suggested above will help in promoting the economic conditions of farm workers but the ultimate solution probably lies in the creation of co-operative system in which all persons including the present working class, will have equal rights. The differences between the large and small farmers will have to go and similarly the landless labourers who are suffering from so many handicaps will have to be brought to the level of all others.

(5) More and Fuller Employment:

Because of seasonal characters of Indian agriculture, the farm labourer does not have full-time employment. Both intensive cultivation and extension of irrigation are very much required to increase agricultural work. There will be double cropping and employment will be available for the whole year.

(6) Public Works Programmes:

The setting up of small industries and public works programmes have great importance in the mobilisation of manpower resources in villages and in raising the wages of the rural masses and, indirectly, the income of the country.

In this connection the usefulness of public works may be emphasized. The Government can plan its projects in the rural areas carefully, so that the workers who may be unemployed during the off-seasons may be gainfully employed. Such projects include the construction of roads, the digging and deepening of tanks and canals, a forestation etc.

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