

# Man's contribution to our cultural heritage degradation: A case study of Moinuddin Chishti Dargah

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The Chishti Dargah in Ajmer, India has been in existence for the past 800 years now, an abode to the famous saint Moinuddin Chishti who established Chishtiya Silsilah of Sufism in India. The complex is a major pilgrim and cultural center throughout the world; it witnesses an enormous tourist influx throughout the year. The site has undergone an immense transformation, today what remains is an amalgamation of historic and modern architecture rapidly modifying, leading to alarming conditions of the historic structures. This paper aims to highlight the dargah as an example to study our contribution in transforming a cultural heritage site according to our needs without any respect to the heritage, it also raises questions against the “appropriate” practice for conservation in high “culture-sensitive” sites.

**Keywords:** *Heritage Conservation, Architectural Heritage, Sufism and Architecture.*

## 1. Introduction

Moinuddin Chishti(1141-1236), was one of the most outstanding figures in the annals of Islamic mysticism and spirituality, also the founder of Chishtiya or Chishti order/Silsilah of Sufism in India. His tomb is respected by people of all religions and thousands from all parts of the world assemble to celebrate the occasion of his Urs. The dargah area contains many buildings such as gates, mosque, residences, tombs, hospices, langars, and much more. Constructed by the rulers of different dynasties, the Mughal emperors, nobles, merchants and mystics during the past eight centuries. It was during the reign of Akbar in the 16th cent. that Ajmer became one of the most important pilgrim centers in the subcontinent. The Mughal emperors displayed great respect for the mausoleum of the saint.<sup>1)</sup>

The various rituals, customs, and ceremonies that developed under the patronage of the rulers such as Sultanates, Mughals, Rajputs, Marathas and Nizams generated an atmosphere of mutual understanding among different segments of society. It gave rise to the growth of cultural affinity and a spirit of affability between all the religions in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>2)</sup>

Today, what remains of this unique cultural heritage site is a complex thriving of cultural value with rapidly modifying heritage structures due to the high need for urbanization to cater to the needs of the tourists. Due to the lack of appropriate heritage management framework the site's vulnerability can be easily witnessed which highlights the clash of ideologies between the stakeholders leading to change in its architecture to rituals to the traditional management.

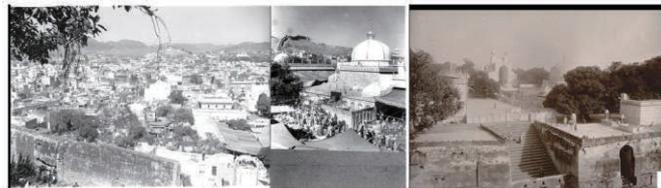
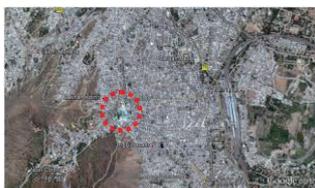


Figure 1: Current Location of Moinuddin Chishti Dargah in Ajmer (Source: Google Maps). Figure 2: Historical Images of Dargah

Complex (Source: British Library & Dargah committee).



Figure 3: Current Site Plan highlighting historic structures. Figure 4 & Figure 5: Current condition of Site.(Source: Author).

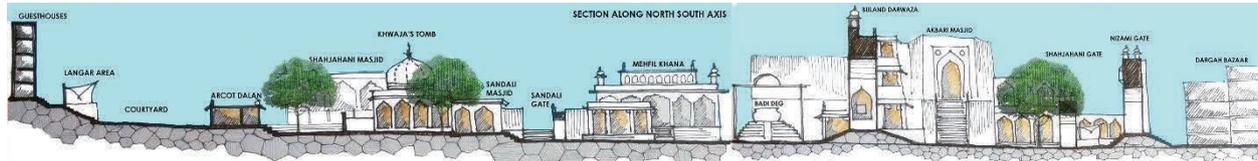


Figure 6: Section along North-South Axis (Source: Author).

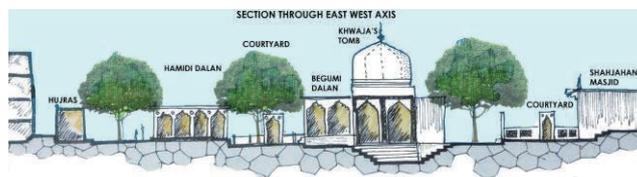


Figure 7: Section along East-West Axis (Source: Author).

## 2. Site and Surroundings

The present complex which is at the foothill of the Taragarh hill can be approached through the station from the Nala Bazaar or Dargah Bazaar road. The complex has ten entrance and exit gateways. The main entrance is through the Nizami gate which is perpendicular to the Dargah Bazaar street and can be seen from afar. Other gates include Solah Khamba gate, Babul Sharif Gate, Langar Khana Gate, Rampuri Dalan gate, etc. The dargah precinct has gone through major changes and development in the past recent years, several multi-storied structures with no regulations are built all around the complex either as guest houses or residences.



Figure 8: Structures of the complex such as Main Courtyard, Sandali Gate, Buland Darwaza, Nizami Gate (Source: Author)

The complex upon the entrance has hujras on either side of the Nizami gate, then a second gateway that is the Shahjahani Gate built by Shahjahan is there which also has Hujras, dalans and shops on either side. After crossing the Shahjahani Gate the entrance to Akbari Masjid can be seen on the eastern side. The next entrance is of Buland Darwaza crossing which on either site we have the Deg in which langars are cooked which were presented by Jahangir and Akbar. Sehan Chirag a small octagonal structure is also there in the middle of the courtyard. Queen Mary's Wazu is also there in this courtyard and just next to it Mehfil Khana where Qawallis and Sama happen during Urs. On the western side, we have Musafir Khana which leads to the Langar Khana where every day Langar is served twice of Barley which Chishti himself used to have. Upon crossing this courtyard, we have two gates leading to another courtyard that is sandal gate and Sabeel gate. The Sandali gate is just opposite to the Sandali Masjid which was constructed during the Sultanate rule as a Dalan which was later modified into a Masjid. On the eastern side of Sandali Gate is Auliya Masjid which was initially a platform but later modified into a small Mosque as Moinuddin Chishti

used to pray on this Platform.

Going further east we enter the main courtyard of the Chishti's tomb, on the front which has Begumi Dalan. Behind this courtyard is Hamidi Dalan and this main courtyard is surrounded by various Dalans constructed over the time. Behind the Chishti's main tomb enclosure which also has graves of his relatives is the Shahjahani Masjid built by Shahjahan in white marble. Behind Shahjahani Masjid are the historic graveyard and Solah khamba which is another funerary structure. Just next to Solah khamba is the step well or Jhalra which is a natural reservoir and was used to perform the ablutions. The entire complex is enclosed either by walls or buildings or Dalans and the complex can only be entered through the gateways.

### 3. Dargah Complex: Architecture, Planning, and Transformation

There are a variety of structures which can be seen in this approx. 6.5 acres site. The planning is very organic, but most of the structures are planned along the east-west axis. Historically, there were gates which bounded the complex and Jhalra on the southern side; it is still accessed by these gates which have been constructed over time.

The structures can be categorized into the following typology:

#### (1) Religious Structures:

##### (a) Mosque:

##### (a.1) Akbari Masjid

Akbar in 1570 AD constructed this mosque; it is a square structure of 140 x 140 feet, and the central arch is 56 feet high. It is a symmetrical double bay structure made up of red sandstone and marble inlay work which now has been hidden due to the layers of whitewash. The main mihrab portion has a central double dome. The entire structure is resting on massive rectangular and square columns.

##### (a.2) Shahjahani Masjid

Shahjahan constructed this mosque in pure white marble. It measures 148 feet x 25 feet and a front courtyard enclosure of 150 feet x 53 feet. The enclosure has five entrances, one in the south, one in the north and three in the east each reached by a flight of stairs. The mosque is on a raised plinth. It has eleven arched entrances on the front portion.

##### (a.3) Auliya Masjid

This mosque was constructed at the place where Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti used to pray. Comparatively small in structure, this mosque is 20 x 6.5 feet in size.

##### (a.4) Sandali Masjid

This mosque was modified by Aurangzeb, whereas earlier was a dalan built during the Sultanate time. It is rectangular in plan and is on a raised plinth. Brackets support the roof which was added later. Kangoora patterns are running all around in place of the parapet. The structure also has marble cladding as a part of later addition and lime wash finish.



Figure 9: Masjids in the complex- Akbari Masjid, Shahjahani Masjid, Auliya Masjid, Sandali Masjid (Source: Author)

#### (b) Wazu or ablution tanks

##### (b.1) Queen Mary's Wazu

Presented by the Queen Mary when she visited Dargah in the early 1900's, this mosque is inspired from the Sultanate architecture which has a roof supported by brackets and columns which used to be constructed during the Sultanate time. It is covered by a flat roof and is made up of red sandstone but now has gone

through many changes and acrylic paint has taken over the existing finish.

**(b.2)Jhalra**

Earlier a water reservoir has gone through many changes over time. Here Moinuddin Chishti used to perform the ablutions. Later many changes were done like deepening the tank and adding steps, and then it was finally converted into a baoli or a step well.

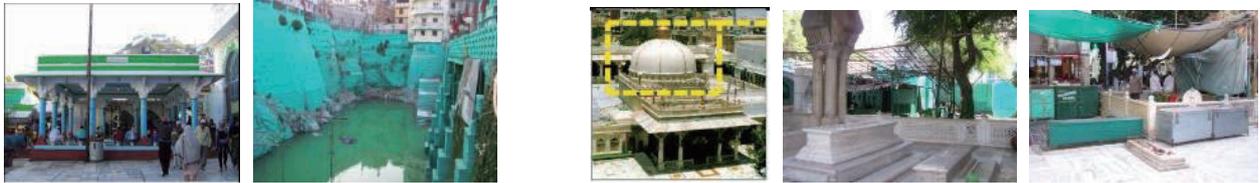


Figure 10: Historic Wazu's in the complex-Queen Mary's Wazu (Left) & Jhalra Figure 11: Funerary Structures- Moinuddin Chishti's tomb (Left), various graves on the site(Middle), Historic graveyard and the encroachments (Right). (Source: Author)

**(2)Funerary Structures:**

**(a)Tombs**

**(a.1)Moinuddin Chishti's tomb**

Square in plan with a dome supported on the roof, this structure had gone through many changes. Made of sandstone with lime plaster finish and a gold finial at the top, the faceted dome structure has various Islamic quotes written all over the structure.

**(b)Graves**

The entire complex is occupied by various graves of rulers/devotees/noblemen/merchants, and so on, some are covered by permanent structures while some have temporary, and some are open also.

**(c)Graveyard**

The Historic graveyard is also there which now is being encroached upon; it is the only area with a green open space and here reside graves of various kings, rulers, and noblemen.

**(3)Residences:**

**(a)Hujras**

Various hujras were constructed by the rulers for the khadims as their residence or meditation places. The entire complex is filled with these small rooms as residences housing in people throughout the complex.

**(b)Dalans**

Numerous dalans were constructed by rulers/devotees as resting places for the pilgrims and for an artist to perform. These structures were inspired by different architectural characteristics of different periods.



Figure 12: Hujras and dalans used as residences in the complex (Left) Figure 13: Buland Darwaza one of the gateways, Courtyards occupied by shops (Source: Author)

**(4)Circulation:**

**(a)Gateways**

The complex has around 13 gateways, the earliest being the Buland Darwaza constructed in the Sultanate time. These gateways have various architectural features and elements and rituals associated with them.

**(b)Courtyards**

Various historic courtyards are also there an example in front of the main tomb i.e. in front of the Begumi Dalan, they are used as gathering spaces and also for various rituals performed in the complex such as

qawwalis, etc.

**(5)Commercial:**

**(a)Shops**

Various commercial activities are performed in this complex such, many shops selling souvenirs, flowers, chadars for the rituals are kept. These shops have majorly come up in the Dalans and the courtyards with temporary awnings.

**4. Analysis**

A detailed analysis was conducted to understand the heritage complex in totality, the study helped to identify structures with high architectural value that needs immediate attention to prevent it from further degradation. Following are the various categories of analysis done to attain the understanding:

**a. Typology Analysis**

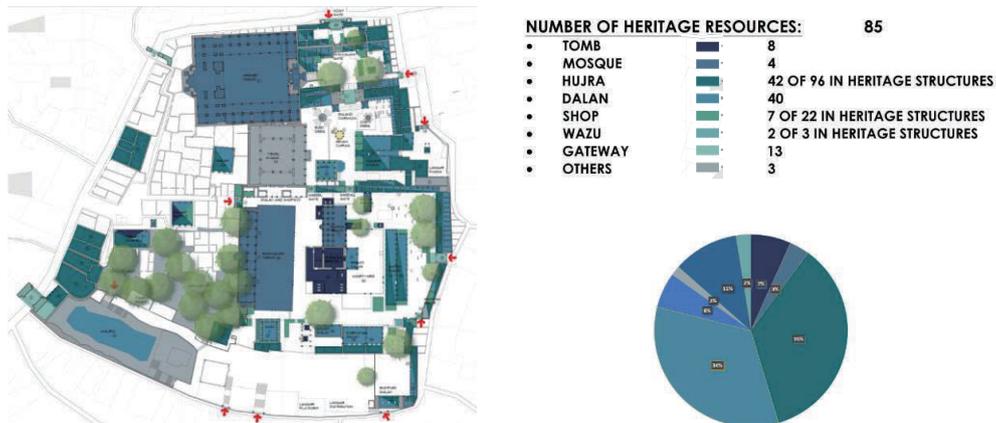


Figure 14: Typology analysis for the heritage complex (Source: Author)

The heritage structures in the Dargah complex can be subdivided into numerous typologies namely tomb, mosque, hujra (earlier residences now mostly used as office spaces), dalans etc. which have modified the character of the place into a mixed-use. A total of 85 heritage structures could be identified which have the overlap of uses with another such as commercial, residential and religious practices are all observed simultaneously in the same structure. The site has the maximum number of hujras and dalans.

**b. Architectural Significance**

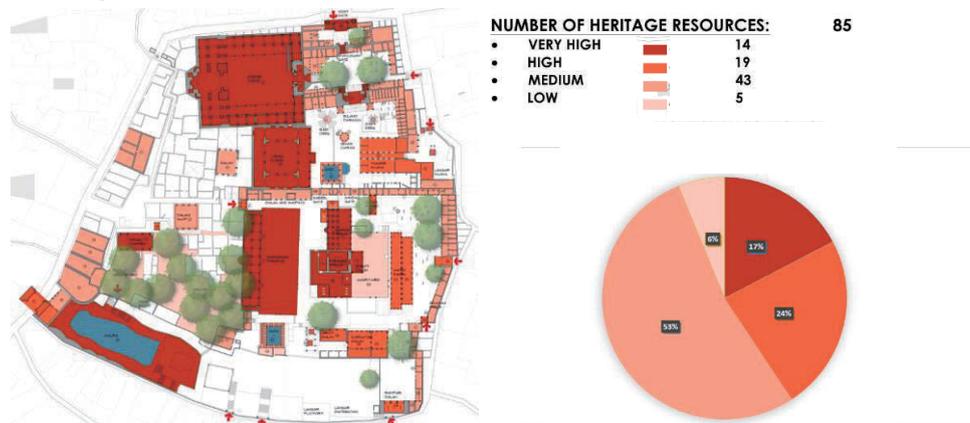


Figure 15: Architectural significance analysis for the heritage complex (Source: Author)

The architectural significance implies the character of a structure based on their architecture which is evaluated according to their importance under four categories that is Historical importance, Associational value, Architectural features, characteristics and present condition of the structures. The structures under the

“Very High” category are structures built by prominent rulers with exceptional architectural characteristics or have been in existence from its inception, the structures with “High” category are the ones which are built by lesser known rulers or noblemen but have high architectural significance. The third category structures are the ones who have “Medium” significance, and these are significantly altered to a great extent, and the fourth category of “Low” contains structures which have low architectural significance or have been altered beyond recognition.

**c. Degrees of Intervention**

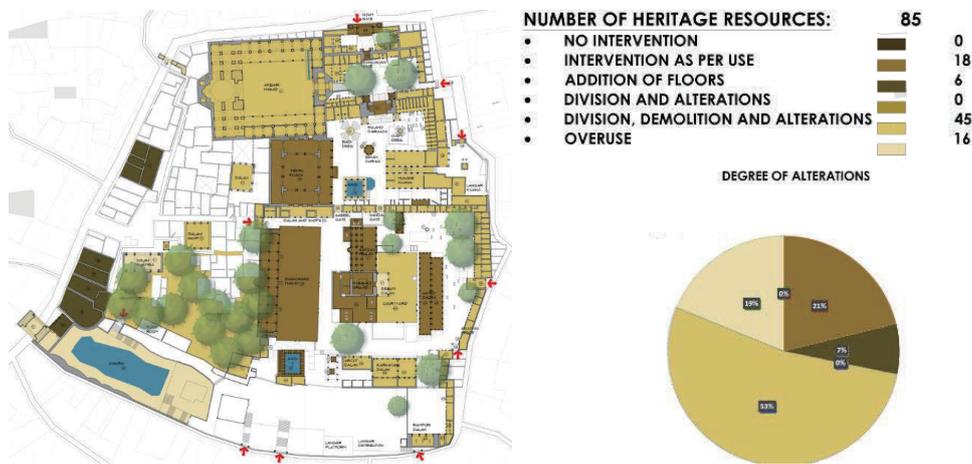


Figure 16: Analysis of the degree of intervention of the heritage structures in the complex. (Source: Author)

The degree of Interventions is the study done to identify the historically important structures for immediate preservation initiatives to prevent further degradation. The level of interventions recorded was alarming as the site does not have any heritage structure left which has not been either modified or altered. The main shrine area, mosques, and main dalans have been modified according to the use, such as the addition of rooms or spaces, blocking of some walls. The hujras and main dalans have suffered the most because of the ownership as they have been either subdivided or demolished and new structures have been built in their place, or there has been the addition of columns and materials which are not compatible with the existing fabric.

**d. Structural Condition Assessment**

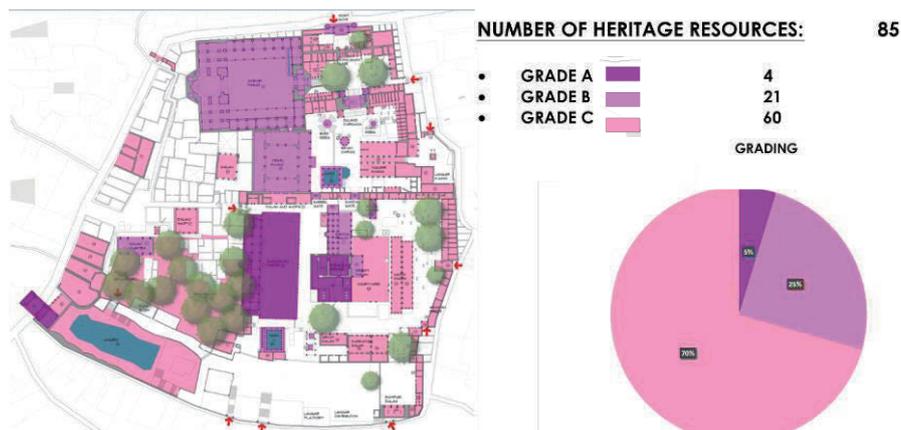


Figure 17: Structural Condition assessment highlighting the structures which need immediate attention. (Source: Author)

Condition assessment is a consolidated study of present structural, cultural and architectural condition of all the structures to understand the quality based upon their architectural significance, compatible use, the degree of intervention, structural quality, etc. With Grade A depicting the structures which are stable and have a minimum intervention, Grade B having structures of medium level interventions and Grade C where the structures despite of high architectural significance have poor quality and need immediate attention.

## 5. Transformations

### (1) Division of properties

Loss of heritage structures as the addition of various elements such as RCC columns and arches is observed. Change in the material is also observed as more tile work are being introduced as each property tries to look different.

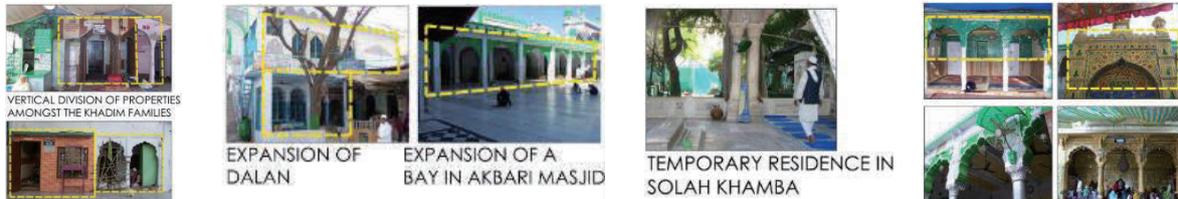


Figure 18: Transformations through the division of properties, expansion of properties, encroachments and external ornamentation with incompatible materials (extreme right). (Source: Author)

### (2) Expansion of properties

Expansion of properties is occurring in the complex due to various reasons. Some properties are expanding vertically, and some are expanding horizontally, for example, in the Akbari Masjid the addition of a new bay has been done as the previous bay had been converted into stores and rooms. This leads to increase in stress and causing deterioration of the structures.

### (3) Encroachments

Due to a lack of vigilance various structures are being encroached upon. Heritage is being lost due to an increase in stress and lack of maintenance due to the encroachments.

### (4) External ornamentation with incompatible materials

Incompatible materials such as acrylic paints are being used on the structures for external ornamentation which is leading to deterioration of the existing structures and decreasing the authenticity. These materials are incompatible and due to layers and layers of application of these paints, the loss of original material is observed.

### (5) Uncontrolled construction around the complex

Due to the uncontrolled construction of multi-storied around the complex, loss of skyline is observed along with a loss of sense of space.

### (6) Structural Reinforcement

For extra structural reinforcement, the addition of various RCC columns is observed instead of the proper strengthening of the columns. The traditional stone columns are either being replaced or modified without prior checking of the impact which also affects the visuals and the character of the space.



Figure 19: Transformations through uncontrolled construction, structural reinforcement, and overuse(extreme right). (Source:Author)

### (7) Overuse

Due to overuse of some structures, cracks and deterioration are observed. There is also a lack of maintenance of the same historic structures which are causing them to degrade.

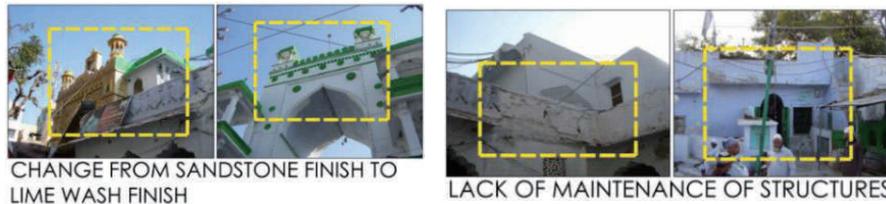


Figure 20: Transformations through the change of materials and lack of maintenance (extreme right). (Source: Author)

### **(8) Change in materials**

Change in original materials by application of various unauthentic materials are observed which are changing the architectural fabric of the place.

### **(9) Lack of maintenance**

Lack of maintenance of almost all the structures in the complex are observed, there is no periodic maintenance plan which is causing a major portion of the structure to deteriorate.

## **9. Conclusion**

Religious heritage buildings and sacred sites are considered as living heritage due to their continuous use. In other words, the social and cultural systems are still running in the space. Sites like the Moinuddin Chishti Dargah in Ajmer raises numerous questions on the role of management bodies in sacred spaces. In the fight between the management, ultimately the heritage suffers, and this complex is one of the best examples of this phenomenon. The studies conducted helped us to understand the complex in a holistic manner. A strong implementation of heritage framework is needed to preserve these values, and it must be handled diligently to achieve the best preservation of our heritage.

Some of the methods that can be implemented are:

(1) Active engagement with the local communities. We must involve all stakeholders in the maintenance and management of the site. (2) In some cases, engaging religious authorities will also help escalate the process of conservation, since this particular site, the Dargah, is a holy pilgrimage as well. (3) We must increase the awareness of this issue, a significant portion of today's youth are unaware that historic national treasure like the Dargah is under severe existential threats. (4) We need an integrated conservation management plan for all historic sites, especially the Dargah. This plan needs emphasis on conservation, and the decision-making procedure regarding historic sites must involve various experts. (5) Certain practices, like qawwalis, the Khadim community practices, are intangible, but they are heritage themselves, and we must strive to conserve them as well. (6) Immediate conservation action plan needs to be formulated for the preservation of Grade A structures categorized above. (7) We must bring forward sensitive proposals which apply the minimum intervention to the modern fabric and bring out the maximum benefit.

## **References**

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