The Scope of Practice in India Today: An Interview with Aastha Khanna About Intimacy Coordination

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Aastha Khanna, 28, is known for being one of the first intimacy coordinators in the Indian film and video industry (Chibber 2021). While serving as assistant director on an Indian romantic drama in 2019, she was asked by the director to lead exercises to build the sense of intimate relationship between the main actors. Through this research, she encountered the work of intimacy coordinators in the U.S. and elsewhere, and she began to incorporate their strategies into the film's process. This led to a deeper dive into current practices of intimacy choreography and coordination, including completing the full training program with Intimacy Professionals Association (IPA) in Los Angeles, after which she began serving as an IC. She's now worked on over twelve productions, including *Gehraiyaan* (Batra 2022), the first Indian film with a full IC department and the most acclaimed mainstream project in the region so far to hire and credit these roles.[1] In 2021, Khanna founded The Intimacy Collective, a non-profit organization based in India with an international scope. Alongside co-founders Sara Arrhusius and Neha Vyas, as well as their growing network of members and specialists, Khanna works to educate media and performance industries from within. Through online discourse on Instagram and Clubhouse, the Collective is jumpstarting important and accessible conversations about consent in film and media production in India, while building valuable connections between practitioners and supporters of the work. In the coming year, the Collective will hold several public events in India to advocate for more widespread use of intimacy coordinators, directors, and choreographers.[2] In addition to the Intimacy Collective, Khanna recently launched the Intimacy Lab which, as she discusses below, will train the first cohort of intimacy coordinators for national and regional Indian industries.[3]

After learning about her work through social media, I reached out to Khanna in June of 2022 for an interview for this publication. In this moment when intimacy practices for stage and screen are expanding exponentially, it is crucial to pay attention to the unique affordances of transnational approaches. Those of us committed to consent-based practices in media-making must build connections across regions not just to share established techniques, but also to further develop these practices. Ongoing cross-cultural conversations can generate deeper understanding of how intimacy norms and specific media production legacies have been differentially shaped by forces like patriarchal domination, colonialism, racial capitalism, homophobia, and transphobia. Because these

intimacy norms and production legacies are culturally specific, the requisite shifts in pursuit of equitable, consent-based frameworks will be local to region, industry, community, and context. Khanna and her colleagues in the Intimacy Collective model how IC professionals can build power and capacity transnationally through shared training and ongoing conversations. In addition to working on sets advocating for safer and braver environments for actors, Khanna and her colleagues advocate for intimacy coordination writ large, which, as she chronicles, is slowly making headway into the media production landscape. In this interview, Khanna discusses her background and entry into the field as well as her understanding of the scope of practice of intimacy coordination in Indian media industries today.

People in the United States often underestimate the robustness of the contemporary Indian film and media ecosystem. Film production took off in Mumbai in the 1920s with the establishment of studios, and over the last century, other production hubs have emerged in cities like Chennai, Hyderabad, Karnataka, Kolkata, Kerala and more, each in their own language. For generations, going to the cinema has been a popular pastime, even when television began diversifying media options in the 1980s. India has historically maintained high theatrical ticket sales with low individual prices, making movies accessible across many income levels. Today, films are produced in all of India's official 22 languages, and then some (Wikipedia 2023).[4] In 1986, India outpaced the United States for most individual films produced annually by a national market—a distinction it has held ever since ("Film Industry" n.d.). Commercial Mumbai-based Hindi studio films, often called "Bollywood" have historically dominated the box office. The most popular form is the "masala film," a mixture of singing, dancing, adventure, and romance. The long-form, large-cast, ultimately uplifting genre has mass appeal both inside and outside the subcontinent. Bollywood films, like Hollywood films, are often critiqued for repeating storylines and recapitulating stereotypes, but nonetheless they have a huge influence on Indian culture. Even if you don't go to the movies, it is near-impossible to avoid these films and their larger-than-life stars. Today, the majority of Indian cinema is made outside of the Bollywood system in smaller but growing linguistic and cultural markets. Since 2021, there have been more films produced in Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil than in Hindi. (Dastidyar 2020). Many have received critical and box office acclaim, the most record-breaking being S.S. Rajamouli's

2022 Telugu film *RRR.* The stylish historical fiction— following revolutionary fighters from Andhra Pradesh rebelling against British colonialism—resonated globally in the wake of social liberation activity. Indian independent films (called parallel cinema or art cinema) have run alongside the commercial music/dance genre since the 1950s. Often more serious thematically, more naturalistic in style, and more explicitly political in content, these films can uplift unique voices of directors, including women and others historically excluded from the mainstream industry. As distribution norms shift, independent films gain new ways to find their audience.

Indian media industries, like those in the United States, have been in a period of transition following the swift shift in media consumption modes under COVID lockdown. Already on the rise before the pandemic, streaming options blossomed after 2020, and cinema attendance declined. Streaming platforms—referred to in India as OTT (for "over-the-top")—bring movies and TV shows directly to people's devices through familiar internet services like Netflix and Amazon, as well as over forty different regional and single-language providers. Cell phone data connectivity in India is currently the lowest priced in the world, and researchers are seeing a rapid increase in video consumption. Streaming OTT content avoids private cable networks and does not require pre-certification by India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) which has strictly regulated media content since 1952. This is significant because, as Khanna describes, the CBFC is particularly stringent about representations of physical intimacy. OTT streaming makes possible a greater diversity of programming both through increased international imports and (potentially controversial) local content. This work features more physical intimacy and, notably, the presence of LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, which are often excluded from film and TV. The advent of this more adventurous content regarding sexuality and gender opens the door for the establishment of professional intimacy coordination in the subcontinent. In this interview, Khanna discusses how she and other professionals are interfacing with new markets.

We also discuss the relationship between the field of intimacy coordination and longstanding feminist critiques of "the male gaze" in media. Building from the scholarship of Laura Mulvey, "gaze theory" explains how narrative cinema reaffirms a sexist power dynamic through presenting men as the ones looking while framing women as the "given-

to-be-seen" (Mulvey 1975). Often, as Mulvey notes, women in film function as erotic spectacle both to male characters onscreen and to spectators in the audience, aligning the perspective of the camera itself with a heterosexual male gaze. The camera's shifting frame can visually cut up the body of an actress and present it to the spectator, who may find libidinal pleasure in the brief sense of possessing her image, regardless of whether sexual acts are even represented onscreen. Many thinkers after Mulvey (including herself, in later works) have complicated this somewhat general mechanics of spectatorship. Theorist bell hooks (1992) notes the "oppositional gaze" of Black feminists like herself, for whom viewing mainstream films from a subaltern position can serve to quicken their critical insight and grant rebellious pleasures. José Esteban Muñoz's "disidentification" (1999) offers another kind of pleasure for queer Brown spectators who rework for their own ends the very media that might seem to exclude them. But neither these interpretive strategies nor decades of feminist filmmaking by women and queer directors have managed to solve the problem of the sexist and sexualizing tendencies of moving images. Screens shift size and shape; the gaze adapts. Is it the responsibility of the intimacy coordinator to counteract the voyeurism of the cinematic stare? India's 2018 #MeToo movement, catalyzed like the US movement by high-profile cases of sexual misconduct in media industries, resulted in raised awareness of the injustices within the system but so far have provoked limited structural change. How might intimacy choreographers deal with the added pressure to "solve the problem" of the patriarchal gaze in the wake of these public conversations about consent violations?

Throughout our conversation, I'm inspired by Khanna's interdisciplinary intelligence: she is simultaneously practical, politically astute, and artistically sensitive. As a fellow IC and IC educator, I find her vision for training intimacy professionals who will be ready to grapple with the cultural and political realities of current Indian media industries urgent and necessary. As a frequent viewer of cinema on small streaming screens, I look forward to the more complex and liberatory stories we will be able to tell, given more equitable and consent-forward production spaces to work within.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I appreciate your career story, the way you went out looking for intimacy professionals nearby, and finding none, became one. How did your undergraduate education in Film and Television Production prepare you for this

work? What other experiences in your life would you consider preparatory for being an intimacy coordinator?

Aastha Khanna: My degree prepared me to be on set for a film or any kind of video production. Specifically, that education allowed me to understand power dynamics and the ways in which people function within the Indian filmmaking industry on an executive and an executioning level, by which I mean both in the way decisions are made in advance as well as how they play out in the heat of production.

Other than that, I am a dancer, so I have had a regular movement practice practically my whole life. Since I was four, I've been training in Indian classical dance, and I've gone on to do all different kinds of body movement practices that helped me understand rhythm and choreography and arc in the telling of stories.

In terms of how I was introduced to social practices that honor diversity and the care of marginalized people, it's been an interesting journey. The first time I was introduced to new concepts of gender and sexuality was at university in England. It was my first week of my bachelor's and it was the first time I was living abroad. One of my housemates was pansexual and that was one of the first things they said about themselves when we were meeting. At that point I had no idea what a pansexual person was! Another one of my housemates was gay. Everybody decided that they wanted to go to the Fresher's fair together. I'm never going to forget that day in my life. We went through all these different societies' stalls, sizing up which ones we wanted to sign up for -- and the most colorful and beautiful stall that stood out amongst all the others was the fetish society! Here I am with all this information coming to me and I'm like "Oh my God! What is going on? This is an institution!"

For a bit of context, I went to a Hindu girls school. Sexuality was very regulated. In year 11, my friend and I would do scandalous stuff for fun. Neither of us were gay, but we would, just for shits and giggles, do things like kiss on the lips. Some teachers saw us do that and it became a huge deal. We were called into the principal's office, who said this is completely unacceptable behavior, and our parents were called in. For perhaps the first time in my life, my parents didn't agree with the way that the school was dealing with it. I remember my father turning around and saying, "I'm happy to go and have a conversation with this principal of yours, because whether or not that is *your* reality, it could be somebody else's and the fact that they're being so intolerant will not look nice if people outside the school get to know about this."

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I'm glad your dad was cool like that.

Aastha Khanna: My parents are very liberal. I couldn't be where I am without their support. I love them, honestly. But anyway, to come from that kind of scholastic space of intolerance and then to suddenly walk into a university where there is institutional support of a fetish society, it's like being an astronaut! Am I on the moon?

I learned something that day. And I kept absorbing. When I came back to India to start working again, the intolerance became jarring. Because all of a sudden, you're back in this environment where people make tone-deaf media content, particularly in regard to LGBTQ+ characters. And you're like: do they not know what they're saying? Those experiences added to me feeling the need to do intimacy work in India.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: In an interview with *The Hindu* you had some very thoughtful things to say about how this work can interface with what we call in film studies "the male gaze," specifically about making its impact on the actors less unfair without infringing on the artistic vision of the director (Chhibber 2021). How do we make it clear to the industry that we aren't "the sex police," while enacting some changes that protect the safety of performers?

Aastha Khanna: I often get asked the question of whether I work towards informing the gaze, frequently by journalists who think that having an intimacy coordinator on set would involve a *correction* of the kind of content that comes out. Recently I was talking with a couple of intimacy coordinators from my cohort in LA about how people don't realize how that's not necessarily our power to have.

Certainly, there have been times when a director has come to ask me if their gaze was correct, or if there was additional information that I could give in order to make something more authentic, or to inform a certain style. Those are moments as an intimacy coordinator that feel very fulfilling. But the collaboration aspect is the main part. We are trying to reach a point where creators trust us enough to feel like our collaboration can add value to their vision.

In terms of how much we can creatively contribute regarding the gaze—it's flexible. It depends on who the creator is and how welcoming they are to the process. There will be times that we can have a big impact. I've been on a film set where the director has turned around and said: "The monitor is yours; the mic is yours; the set is yours. I'm going; just give me what I need," then they've gone and sat in a corner in video village and just let me do my thing, giving me complete creative control. But there have also been times where I've not even needed to go near video village, because they don't listen to anything I say once tape is rolling. But at least I know in a space like that, my performers and the rest of the crew are feeling safer and that the absolutely mandatory basic protocols we brought to the table in pre-production are being upheld.

For me in India, the most important goal has been to bring an intimacy coordinator into the room *at all*. I'm one person, and there are a few other people that have recently started working as intimacy coordinators in India, but even for us, this cannot be a full-time job. You will not pay your bills. Not because India is not making content! It's because people are not hiring intimacy coordinators. They're not valuing it within the budget. That's a huge battle to fight. The aim is to make

sure that producers are comfortable hiring an intimacy coordinator. We want them to know that we work in a flexible way to get people what they need. Filmmaking requires flexibility on all sides: you can't walk in with a stencil and be like: "I'm going to do it like ABC and everybody else must adapt!" That's not the way it works, at least over here. To reach a point where producers feel like intimacy coordinators are simply helping to execute intimate scenes in a safer way, making their presence on a film set worth it, *that* would be an achievement for me.

Usually in this conversation about the violence of the gaze, people speak of women being the oppressed and men being the oppressors, exclusively. It's very binary and cis-heteronormative. They also articulate to me their concern about hyper-sexualization of bodies, whether it's an item song or a sexual violence scenario where there's some kind of glorification of the male character. When those kinds of conversations arise, well-intentioned outsiders often ask: "Will you be able to change that?" And I'm like: "No! If it's what the creator's going to make, if it's the vision, if it's in the script and the shot list already, I can't necessarily change that!" Maybe someday I could walk into a room and turn around at them and say: "This is absolutely inappropriate. I'm not going to engage with you. I'm not going to be part of the project." But can I stop them from making the film? No! The only way that I can make certain tweaks is by entering the process myself, to become a part of it myself.

The only way that issues with the sexualizing gaze are going to change is when people that are *consuming* that content turn around and say: "This is rubbish, I'm not going to consume it." The onus of that responsibility lies on the audience as much as it does on the makers.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes, that's a very important point.

Aastha Khanna: Turning that onus on us, trying to find one shoulder to lean this weight on, to make us responsible for the way society views certain stories? It's unfair! So no - I'm not the sex police. I'm not the gaze police. That's not my job. It can't be.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: It makes me think of the harm reduction model used in addiction frameworks and other social work contexts. We have to meet people where theyare; we can't pretend we live in a perfect world, or a swiftly perfectible one. Straight men do still dominate the roles of director, producer, and cinematographer in every national film industry. Heterosexual romance tropes are full of violent overtones that get glamorized by the power of the big screen. We can't change all these things. At the very least, intimacy coordinators are trying to enact some harm reduction protocols as we all continue muddling forward in these troubled industries. It's not our responsibility to fix thousands of years of objectification of women; that's a high ask.

Aastha Khanna: Yeah, and overnight! That's not gonna happen! I'm very quick to admit that I myself have 25 years of systemic coding and unconscious bias that I'm

working against internally to do the work I do every single day. Not to admit that would be a failure on my part. It's very important to me to be cognizant of the times that I make mistakes. There are times I've looked back at something I've said in a production process even a few years ago and thought: "Oh my God, what are you thinking?" But one is ever evolving.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes, we keep evolving and so do our industries. How is intimacy direction currently interfacing with different media production methods and mechanisms in India?

Aastha Khanna: Here in India, intimacy coordination is currently starting to make some impact in the OTT and the Web series space. The reason for that is that these are the only media contexts involving much representation of intimacy at all! In India, the theatrical release of films requires a censor certificate. The censors will usually end up requiring that filmmakers cut out scenes that are visually representative of simulated sex, nudity, or violence in any literal way. Kissing is allowed in features, but actors must be fully clothed. If they aren't kissing, there is some room for suggested or implied nudity. For women characters, they will allow just the back or shoulders, and for male characters they will sometimes allow a shirtless situation. In certain scenarios they'll allow bathing suits, but in that case there's no kissing or thrusting motions allowed, even for films designated for mature audiences, what we call the "A certificate" (which is like an "R rating" in the US). If it starts to get more realistically sexual, they will completely cut it out, so this affects what filmmakers will even *try* to make. Bear in mind, most of the people that sit on the censor board are sixty-plus year-old men, like most other politicians.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Right, they're like the censor politicians. We have a different regulatory system here.

Aastha Khanna: Yes, in India only those films that can pass their barometer will be released theatrically. That same censor board also regulates content for TV. The only certificate they give for anything on TV or telecast in our networks or satellites is the "U certification" or what the US would call PG-13. This means no kissing on TV at all! If they want to imply it, they just show two people kind of falling into each other's arms and then closing the door or the window shade! In live theatre as well, adult content is all implied only. There are certain experimental theater groups outside of mainstream spaces that will include intimate scenes in some way or another, but again, no real nudity and no real simulated sex on stage. So, the scope for growth of an intimacy director at this point is very limited because there are still so few detailed intimate scenes being produced. Justifying their job role in those scenarios is difficult. That's kind of how it is right now.

In India, the actor's union is not extremely strong. It's mainly TV actors, in fact, most of the people that work in mainstream cinema or on web shows are not members. However, the producer's guild is important. If the producers guild is able to put down some kind of guidelines around intimacy work and the use of intimacy

coordinators, that would be a big step. That's the aim for this year. I'm working tirelessly on this advocacy, and hopefully before the next election we will be able to find some kind of movement forward there.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: I look forward to hearing more about it as it develops. Along those lines, what do you want folks outside of India to know about your work there? How can intimacy professionals elsewhere support you?

Aastha Khanna: It's important for all the countries that have made significant strides in professional intimacy practices to know that we're still working on it, and that there are far fewer people working in staging intimacy here than elsewhere.

Globally, the more conversation around it, the more it'll be able to penetrate into our space of work in India, because India is extremely open to global social media and global news. Our media pays attention to and borrows from Western pop culture, so it's important for people that work in the space of intimacy in the U.S. and elsewhere to keep pushing it and considering its global impact. It is encouraging to see what intimacy coordinators in the West are doing! Hearing these stories gives us strength to keep pushing at all these boulders impeding this kind of work here.

The understanding of an intimacy professional is only a few years old in India. I was the first Indian here to do this work, I think only one person before me was flown in from Canada to do one show, Amanda Cutting, but other than that nobody else! So it's young, I feel like we have a long, long way to go.

We are currently starting a Lab here, which has joined hands with IPA (Intimacy Professionals Association) in L.A. Since IPA is SAG-AFTRA accredited, the program we're bringing in is that same training but adapted to India, adding four more classes contextualizing what it is like to work here. These added modules will allow us to explore the different forms of diversity in India and educate future I.C.s around unconscious bias, legal issues, and specific conversations about how sexual harassment functions here in India. So instead of it being a 16-week program, it's a 20-week program beginning August of 2022. I'm looking forward to leading these trainings and sharing what I know!

Having the training program here in India will allow for a lot more people to learn the practices. Then they will start to find ways to penetrate the business and to reach out to their own networks to involve intimacy professionals. I feel like we're there now, that's the phase we are ready for.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: What do you feel like intimacy coordination work in the subcontinent has to share with the rest of the world?

Aastha Khanna: I think one of the most interesting local elements is not about the content but about how we work on set. The flexibility of our processes and the conversation

around how we must be responsive and collaborative in order to become a working gear in the larger system of filmmaking are the kinds of things that the West might learn.

Many parts of the West already have intimacy coordinators, but already in some places they are becoming just another thing to sign off on, and so the focus becomes on the paperwork rather than the embodied process. I've heard from a lot of working I.C.s in the film industry in the West that they often don't get the opportunity to creatively involve themselves and truly influence the art form. Here in India, we are seeing that change really quickly, and I believe there is the possibility for intimacy coordinators here to truly become creative directors of scenes of intimacy.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: This makes me think of what you mentioned at the beginning about your training in classical dance - the power of physical practice and a performer's own embodied awareness.

Aastha Khanna: Yes - that's one thing that I feel like India does well that perhaps we might be able to share with the rest of the globe as we expand and explore: not just training of intimacy coordinators, but training of performers. I'm interested in developing workshops with performers where they can explore their own bodies and their own boundaries. How wonderful it would be if we could give actors opportunities to train in consent-based performance practice and give time for them to evolve through those processes. People here appreciate the value of acting school, actors go to workshops to learn different acting methods. It's important to the future of intimacy in performance to enable actors to develop their skills through affirming, professional workshop spaces, not only in the short timelines of film and TV where it's often so rushed. I think there's hope for performers to get to know a lot more about themselves and what they can bring to the creative process if they're given the opportunity to understand the intimacy work outside of the power dynamic of a live set where they have to deliver a tight performance. That embodied learning space for performers will be super fruitful for intimacy work.

Joy Brooke Fairfield: Yes! Thanks so much for sharing these ideas with me. I look forward to watching our field grow as it sees uptake in the Indian context, particularly given this rich history of embodied performance training that you're talking about. Perhaps we can have a follow up conversation in a few years to see how the scope of practice continues to develop.

Postscript:

After speaking with Khanna, my mind turned to my acting teacher Veenapani Chawla (1947 - 2014) founder of Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts Research, an experimental performance training facility near Puducherry in Tamil Nadu. The multi-faceted acting methods developed by Chawla and her company for their unique stage plays are physically rigorous and known for powerful results, making it a favored destination for

Indian film and TV actors.[5] Like Khanna, Chawla had extensive training in both European and Indian performance production traditions. Seeing beyond the false binary of these cultural histories, Chawla sought in her work "an in-between space of cultural ambivalence" that was "opposed to the idea of purity and the authenticity of origins" and was able then, to "transgress the confinement of both metropolitan and provincial orthodoxies" (Chawla 2006, 2). I hear in Khanna's insights this same kind of productive cultural ambivalence and a rejection of simplistic reductions to East vs. West or traditional vs. contemporary. There is nothing particularly western about consent-based practices—on the contrary, history shows us that the Euro-colonial project of cultural domination has taken sexual misconduct with it wherever it has sailed. As other scholars of consent-based performance have pointed out, many of these practices are only coming from the so-called "West" today through lineages of non-violence and repair emergent from international subaltern liberation struggles in the first place (Fairfield et al 2019; Barnette et al 2019; Jones 2019; Villarreal 2022). Issues surrounding consent, boundaries, and respect for the sovereign individual are fraught today particularly because global flows of power situate subjects differently against the backdrop of history. Approaches to staging simulated sexual acts must be informed both by our community norms as well as an understanding of how we're enmeshed into transnational dynamics.

As actors training at Adishakti, we practiced sometimes arduous physical and imaginative skills to help us access what Chawla calls "the source of performance energy" (Gokhale 2014). These techniques borrow from Indian classical forms like the Kudiyyattam dance theatre of Kerala as well as contemporary European traditions that Chawla trained in at Odin Teatret and London School of Drama. Together, the framework helps to cultivate an open inner space for the performer, strengthening our expressive flexibility as well as our resilience in allowing intense emotional energies to flow through us. Today, I understand the intimate self-knowledge and self-management developed through these trainings as also necessary to the work of responsibly simulating scenes of intimate pleasure or violence. Chawla's vision of a performance practice grounded in self-aware physical acting techniques invites actors to craft intentional reproducible forms and then find the vital flow within it that makes it appear fresh. Remembering the power of these methods offered by Chawla and other teachers at Adishakti, I grow particularly

excited about the work that Khanna and the Intimacy Collective are doing to popularize notions of consent-based practice within creative industries in India, and how new techniques developed under different cultural contexts might inform and enrich global approaches to staging intimacy onscreen and in live performance. Khanna's vision for embodied learning spaces in which performers can explore and train in simulated intimacy practices sounds like it would result in not only safer and more ethical workspaces but also bolder and more creative media output. Given supportive contexts like the ones Khanna envisions, what braver and deeper onscreen stories could we tell about ourselves and the ways we love and hurt and try to heal in this wreckage of history?

[1] For more on the process of shooting *Gehraiyaan,* see: https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/inside-the-intimacy-department-of-gehraiyaan-intimacy-director-dar-gai-and-her-team-on-the-art-of-shooting-sex-scenes-10334471.html and https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/with-gehraiyaan-intimacy-seems-to-come-of-age-in-hindi-cinema-10327811.html

[2] For more information about the Intimacy Collective, follow them on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/theintimacycollective/ and on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/theintimacycollective/

[3] For more on the Intimacy Lab, see their website at https://www.theintimacylab.in/about or follow them on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/theintimacylab/

[4] Wikipedia lists Indian films in 33 different languages

[5] Learn more about Adishakti here: http://adishaktitheatrearts.com/

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