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The Navkar Mahāmantra in Jainism: Philosophical Foundations, Spiritual Significance, Ethical Orientation, and Contemporary Relevance

Mrs. Bharati Sanket Lodha[1*], Dr. Sanket Ramakant Lodha[2], Dr. Yogesh Suresh Bafana[3]

[1]Shri Jain Vidya Prasarak Mandal's, Sou Tarabai Shankarlal Mutha Kanya Prashala & Junior College, Fattechand Marg, Pavana Nagar, Chinchwad, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Pune, Maharashtra 411033, India.

[2]Postdoc Fellow, Lincoln University, Wisma Lincoln, 12-18, Jalan SS 6/12, Ss 6, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

[3]Principal, Arihant College of Pharmacy, Sonewadi, Kedgaon, Ahmednagar (Ahilyanagar), Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Namokara (Pali: Navkar Mahāmantra or Navakārā Mantra) is the most important and popular prayer of Jainism in its basic fivefold greetings, common to both the Digambar and Śvetāmbara sects. While theistic mantras are prayers addressed to a Creator, it praises five groups of spiritual beings (pañca-parameṣṭhī): arihanta, siddha, ācārya, upādhyāya, and sādhu. This study explores the Navkar Mantra as a succinct summary of Jain teachings of philosophy, ethics, and meditation. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive research approach through secondary literature and translations of canon texts, it seeks to (1) distinguish historical proof of the Mantra from traditional accounts of its origins; (2) present the Prakrit text along with translation and word-by-word analysis; (3) analyze the five supremacies as a hierarchical scheme of spirituality; (4) connect the Mantra with Jainism's concepts of jīva and ajīva, karma, liberation (mokṣa), three jewels, ahimsa, anekāntavāda, and aparigraha; (5) compare the use in the Digambar and Śvetāmbara sects; and (6) explore the practical value of the Mantra for ethics and meditation in daily life. In this way, the paper concludes that the unique philosophical value of the mantra is contained in its non-theistic nature; it celebrates the virtues achieved, rather than seeking a favor from a deity, and thus sets out a way of self-purification that is both meditative and moral. Finally, the paper notes that there is relatively little empirical work on the Navkar.

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1. Introduction

Jainism is one of the oldest continuously practised religious traditions of South Asia. Its adherents, numbering a few million, have exercised an influence on Indian philosophy, ethics, art, and public life that far exceeds their demographic size (Dundas, 2002; Cort, 2001). The tradition understands itself as an eternal path of liberation re-taught in each cosmic era by twenty-four *tīrthaṅkaras*, "ford-makers" who cross the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) and show others the way. Its central commitments are the plurality and eternity of souls, a rigorous theory of karma as subtle matter binding the soul, absolute non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), the many-sidedness of truth (*anekāntavāda*), and non-possession (*aparigraha*) (Jaini, 1979; Tatia, 1951).

Among this tradition, there is one unique mantra called the Navkar Mahāmantra. It is recited in the morning and evening, before beginning a ritual or studying, when someone is ill or at the time of death, and in different life cycle ceremonies. It is the first thing a Jain kid learns, and it is recited by both monks and laymen, Digambaras and Śvetāmbaras, inside temples and even in digital forms. This mantra is termed mahāmantra as it is considered to have all the scriptures in some syllables.

The prominence raises three types of academic inquiry. The first one is historical – which is the history behind this mantra and how did it come into its current shape? The second type is philosophical – how can one formula for greeting contain a philosophy and a way? And the third type is practical – which is how much can be said with responsibility about the function of the mantra in contemporary ethical development and happiness? Pop literature usually mixes up all these inquiries, assigning the mantra an exact date and author and presenting the medical advantages as an absolute truth. This essay tries to separate the three inquiries from each other.

There are three main contributions in the paper. Firstly, it brings together the evidence regarding the antiquity of the mantra, but without dating it to any particular time or giving its author. Secondly, it provides a schema (figure 1) for interpreting the mantra as being at work on all three levels - metaphysical, practical, and contemplative at once. Lastly, it provides a critique of current claims, and shows when the results of meditation research may be applied and when they should not.

2. Methodology and Literature Review

2.1 Research approach

The research is qualitative, descriptive, interpretive, and analytical. The source material for the research consists exclusively of secondary sources including scholarly monographs, translations of classic and post-classic texts of Jainism, as well as general literature about Indian philosophy and contemporary research reviews on meditation in the contemporary section of the paper. There have been no empirical or experimental data gathered during this process. The sources were chosen according to the following criteria: academic value, representativity of Digambara and Śvetāmbara traditions, and direct relation to the subject of the research or doctrine of the mantra.

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The interpretive strategy is based on the text/practice model that originates from the study of religion. Both the text aspects and the practical side of the mantra are considered: mantra as a text with its philological background and a practice within rituals, asceticism, and devotion (Cort, 2001; Laidlaw, 1995). Philosophy is understood in terms of categories used within the Jain tradition (tattva, dravya, guṇa-sthāna) according to the Tattvārtha Sūtra and its commentary.

2.2 Review of scholarship

Dundas' account (2002) of Jain history, doctrine, and ritual constitutes the best available survey in English. His discussion will prove useful in understanding the relationship between the mantra and the formation of the canon, the split between Digambaras and Śvetāmbaras, and Jain ritual practices both among laypeople and monks. Dundas is circumspect regarding chronology before the period in which independent evidence comes into play; this attitude is shared in this work.

Jaini's work (1979), which is still the authoritative exposition of Jain doctrine in its role as a path to liberation, organised around guṇasthāna (progressive spiritual development) and ritual practices of laity and monastics, is essential for the proper understanding of Jain doctrine, as is his later collection of his papers (2000) and the study of Jain discussions of woman liberation (1991).

Sociological and historical studies of Jainism include Vilas A. Sangave (1980, 2001) who gives information about the community, the institutions, and the culture of the Jains, including rituals and practices through which the mantra was performed in everyday life.

A very influential philologist of the Śvetāmbara canonical corpus is Colette Caillat (1965). Her monograph on atonement of monastics is invaluable for studying the language, ritual formulas, and contexts in which the early tradition of namukkāra was taught, as well as providing a model of philological scruples required in dealing with Prakrit texts.

Kristi L. Wiley (2004, 2009) provides reference books on terminology and information about all branches that may be used in verification of technical terms such as pañca-parameṣṭhī, ācārya, and upādhyāya, as well as in the modern organization of the Jain tradition.

Nathmal Tatia (1951, 1994) has written a philosophical systematic exposition of Jainism and produced a translation of the Tattvārtha Sūtra by Umāsvāti which is recognized as the only authoritative text of Jain doctrine by both major sects. It is the main source of doctrinal correspondences in Section 7.

Other key research contributes to the field as well. The analysis of the practice of Jain religion and the economics of renunciation is done by Cort (2001) and Laidlaw (1995); Long (2009) presents an approachable but rigorous overview; Vallely (2002) offers an ethnographic analysis of a community of Jain ascetics; Matilal (1981) discusses the philosophy of anekāntavāda; Chapple (2002) edits the milestone collection regarding Jainism and ecology; and Folkert (1993) focuses on scriptures and community. Comparative literature used for this paper includes Alper (1989) on mantra in Indian tradition, Gethin (1998) and Anālayo (2003) on meditation in Buddhism, and Flood (1996) on Hinduism. The empirical literature used includes the reviews of Sedlmeier et al. (2012), Goyal et al. (2014), and Van Dam et al. (2018).

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3. Historical Background of Jainism

3.1 Origins and the tīrthaṅkara tradition

Jain tradition holds that the faith has no human founder. In each half of the cosmic time cycle, twenty-four tīrthaṅkaras appear. In the present era the first is Ṛṣabhanātha (Ādinātha), traditionally credited with teaching the arts of civilisation and then renouncing the world, and the last is Mahāvīra (Dundas, 2002). The historicity of the early tīrthaṅkaras cannot be assessed by conventional historical methods. For the twenty-third, Pārśvanātha, many scholars accept a plausible historical figure preceding Mahāvīra, and the Śvetāmbara canon describes a community of Pārśva's followers encountering Mahāvīra's (Dundas, 2002; Jacobi, 1884).

Mahāvīra (Vardhamāna, "Jñātṛputra") is traditionally dated to 599–527 BCE, although many modern scholars favour a somewhat later chronology within the sixth or fifth century BCE, contemporaneous with the Buddha (Dundas, 2002). He renounced worldly life, practised severe austerity, attained omniscience (*kevala-jñāna*), and taught for roughly three decades in the Gangetic plain, organising a fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen (*caturvidha saṅgha*).

3.2 Canon, schism, and literature

Both sects trace their teaching to Mahāvīra's discourses as transmitted by his chief disciples (*gaṇadharas*), but they differ on what survives. The Śvetāmbaras preserve a canon of Āgama texts, redacted over centuries and traditionally associated with councils at Pāṭaliputra and Valabhī; the Digambaras hold that the original canon was progressively lost and regard as authoritative later works such as the *Ṣaṭkhaṇḍāgama* and *Kaṣāyaprābhṛta*, together with the writings of Kundakunda (Dundas, 2002; Jaini, 1979). The sects also differ on monastic nudity, the liberation of women, and aspects of iconography, issues treated in detail by Jaini (1991). The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* of Umāsvāti is accepted by both and serves as a common doctrinal summary (Tatia, 1994).

Table 1. Historical Development of Jainism (chronology indicative; early dates are traditional or debated)

Period	Development	Status of evidence
Traditional antiquity	Ṛṣabhanātha as first tīrthaṅkara of the present cosmic age	Traditional belief; not historically verifiable
c. 8th–7th century BCE	Pārśvanātha, 23rd tīrthaṅkara	Accepted by many scholars as plausibly historical
c. 6th–5th century BCE	Mahāvīra; formation of the fourfold community	Historical, with disputed precise dates (traditionally 599–527 BCE)
Early centuries BCE–CE	Oral transmission; early Āgama strata; royal patronage; inscriptions (e.g., Khāravela inscription)	Textual and epigraphic evidence, partly debated

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Period	Development	Status of evidence
First centuries CE	Gradual consolidation of Digambara and Śvetāmbara identities	Traditional dates exist; modern scholarship stresses a gradual process
c. 2nd–5th century CE	Umāsvāti's *Tattvārtha Sūtra*	Date and sectarian affiliation debated
5th century CE onward	Valabhī redaction (Śvetāmbara); Digambara canonical and philosophical literature	Traditional and textual evidence
Medieval period	Philosophical and logical systematisation; temple culture; major authors such as Haribhadra and Hemacandra	Well-documented
Modern period	Reform movements, diaspora, institutional academic study	Well-documented

Table 1 shows that the evidential quality of the Jain historical record improves markedly from the early centuries CE. This matters for the study of the mantra: the formula appears in a tradition whose earliest strata are difficult to date, and any account of its "origin" must reckon with that difficulty.

4. Historical Origins and Significance of the Navkar Mahāmantra

4.1 What the evidence supports

Three lines of evidence bear on the antiquity of the mantra.

The first is epigraphic. The Hāthīgumphā inscription of King Khāravela of Kaliṅga, usually assigned to around the first century BCE although the date is discussed, opens with a salutation to the *arahantas* and to all *siddhas* (Sircar, 1965; see also Salomon, 1998 on epigraphic dating). This shows that veneration of these two categories of liberated beings was established in Jain circles by that period. It does not show that the full five-line formula existed then.

The second is the manuscript and commentarial tradition. The Digambara *Ṣaṭkhaṇḍāgama* begins with a *maṅgala* invocation consisting of the five salutations, and the Śvetāmbara canon, notably in its opening of the *Bhagavatī* (*Vyākhyāprajñapti*), likewise places the salutation at the head of the text (Dundas, 2002). The convention of beginning scriptures with this formula is therefore widely attested in the literature of both sects.

The third is Śvetāmbara commentarial discussion of the structure. Traditional commentators distinguish the five salutations from the four concluding lines, which are commonly treated as an explanatory supplement (*cūlikā*) stating the formula's purpose and merit (see the discussion in Dundas, 2002, and the reference entries in Wiley, 2004). This suggests a layered formation, in which a core of five salutations was later framed by interpretive lines, although the exact sequence and dating of these layers remain uncertain.

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4.2 Traditional accounts

Jain tradition regards the mantra as eternal, in the sense that the five categories of venerable beings exist in every age and the salutation to them is therefore without beginning. Some devotional accounts attribute it to the *gaṇadharas* or even to Mahāvīra himself. These are statements of faith and are respected as such, but they are not supported by documentary evidence. This paper therefore **makes no claim about a precise date or authorship** of the mantra. The responsible scholarly conclusion is that the five-fold salutation was present in Jain scriptural practice by the early centuries of the common era at the latest, that its precursors are older, and that its present nine-line form, with minor variations of orthography and dialect, is established in the manuscript tradition.

4.3 Religious and cultural significance

The mantra is *aparājita* (unconquered) and *anādi-nidhana* (without beginning or end) in devotional language. In practice its significance operates on several levels: as an opening to all scriptural study and ritual, as the foundational liturgical text, as a protective and merit-generating recitation (*maṅgala*), and as the final thought to be held at death, especially in the tradition of ritual fasting unto death (*sallekhanā*), where it is recited by and for the dying (Laidlaw, 1995; Dundas, 2002). Its universality across sects is notable in a tradition marked by sectarian difference: devotees of different lineages can recite it together, which gives it an integrative social function (Cort, 2001).

5. Detailed Explanation of the Navkar Mahāmantra

5.1 Text, transliteration, and meaning

The mantra is composed in Ardhamāgadhī Prakrit (Śvetāmbara recitation) or the closely related Śaurasenī-influenced Prakrit of Digambara texts, so small differences occur in spelling and phonetics. The version below follows the widely used Śvetāmbara recitation, with Digambara variants noted after the table. The transliteration uses the standard IAST system.

Table 2. Navkar Mahāmantra: Original Text, Transliteration, and Meaning

No.	Devanāgarī	Transliteration (IAST)	Meaning
1	णमो अरिहंताणं	Ṇamo arihaṃtāṇaṃ	Salutation to the arihantas, the liberated teachers who have destroyed the four destructive karmas
2	णमो सिद्धाणं	Ṇamo siddhāṇaṃ	Salutation to the siddhas, the fully liberated souls
3	णमो आयरियाणं	Ṇamo āyariyāṇaṃ	Salutation to the ācāryas, heads of the monastic order
4	णमो उवज्झायाणं	Ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ	Salutation to the upādhyāyas, preceptors of scripture
5	णमो लोए सव्वसाहूणं	Ṇamo loe savvasāhūṇaṃ	Salutation to all sādhus (monks and nuns) in the world

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No.	Devanāgarī	Transliteration (IAST)	Meaning
6	एसो पंच णमोक्कारो	Eso paṃca ṇamokkāro	This fivefold salutation
7	सव्व पावप्पणासणो	Savva pāvappaṇāsaṇo	destroys all sins (demeritorious karma)
8	मंगलाणं च सव्वेसिं	Maṃgalāṇaṃ ca savvesiṃ	and among all auspicious things
9	पढमं हवइ मंगलं	Paḍhamaṃ havai maṃgalaṃ	is the foremost auspicious.

Note on variants. In some Digambara recitations the first line reads *Ṇamo arahaṃtāṇaṃ* (with *arahaṃta* as the older Prakrit form), and the final verb may appear as *havadi*. Śvetāmbara tradition generally recites nine lines and treats the whole as the *mahāmantra*, while in some practice, especially in meditative repetition (*japa*), the five-line core is the primary unit. The commonly cited counts are sixty-eight syllabic units for the nine-line form and thirty-five for the five-line core; these counts follow traditional reckoning and vary with orthographic convention. The author should confirm the preferred recension against a critical source before submission.

The word *ṇamo* (Sanskrit *namas*) means salutation, and its grammatical dative construction (*-āṇaṃ*) marks the plural genitive/dative of those revered. The phrase *loe* in line 5 ("in the world") is significant: it signals that the sādhus are venerated wherever they are, without sectarian or geographical limitation.

5.2 Interpretation of the five salutations

Ṇamo arihaṃtāṇaṃ. *Arihanta* is commonly analysed as "one who has destroyed the enemies (*ari-hanta*)", namely the four destructive (*ghātiyā*) karmas that obscure knowledge, obscure perception, produce delusion, and obstruct energy. The arihanta has attained omniscience while still embodied. Because the arihanta teaches the path after attainment, the mantra places this being first, even though siddhas are in some respects more advanced. This ordering is a point of deliberate theology, discussed in Section 6.

Ṇamo siddhāṇaṃ. *Siddhas* are souls that have shed all karma, including the four non-destructive (*aghātiyā*) karmas, upon the death of the body, and now abide at the apex of the universe (*siddha-śilā*) in infinite knowledge and bliss, free from rebirth. They are formless and do not intervene in the world.

Ṇamo āyariyāṇaṃ. *Ācāryas* lead the monastic community, ordain, and uphold its discipline. They are traditionally described as embodying thirty-six virtues, which are variously enumerated across sects.

Ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ. *Upādhyāyas* are monastic teachers of scripture. They are traditionally associated with the twenty-five virtues, often connected with mastery of the eleven *aṅgas* and fourteen *pūrvas* in classical formulation.

Ṇamo loe savvasāhūṇaṃ. *Sādhus* (including *sādhvīs*) are monks and nuns who follow the five great vows and practise self-restraint. They are traditionally associated with twenty-seven virtues. The phrase "all" (*savva*) implies universality of reverence: the mantra honours monastic virtue itself, not particular individuals or lineages.

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5.3 Interpretation of the concluding lines

The four concluding lines state the soteriological function of the formula. *Eso paṃca ṇamokkāro* identifies the preceding five salutations as a single unit of devotional action. *Savva pāvappaṇāsaṇo* asserts that this action destroys all *pāva* (demeritorious karma). *Maṃgalāṇaṃ ca savvesiṃ* places it among all auspicious things, and *paḍhamaṃ havai maṃgalaṃ* declares it the foremost of them.

A careful reading avoids two errors. The first is to interpret *pāvappaṇāsaṇo* as a magical claim that recitation automatically erases karma. Jain karma theory is rigorous: karma is bound by the soul's own passions and activity and is removed by restraint and knowledge, not by external favour (Jaini, 1979). A philosophically coherent reading is that salutation, performed with proper inner disposition, generates wholesome mental states and detachment (*saṃvara* and *nirjarā*), which in turn reduce harmful karmic binding. The second error is to treat it as petition. Nothing is requested; the mantra contains no verb of asking. It is an act of reverence whose value lies in the transformation of the reciter.

Table 2a. Structural Analysis of the Mantra

Component	Lines	Function
Five salutations (*pañca-ṇamokāra*)	1–5	Veneration of five categories of attained persons
Statement of identity	6	Names the five as one unit of practice
Statement of effect	7	Describes the removal of demeritorious karma
Statement of value	8–9	Declares its auspiciousness (*maṅgala*)

Table 2a clarifies that the mantra moves from veneration to explanation to evaluation, a progression that mirrors the Jain path from faith through understanding to conduct.

6. Pañca-Parameṣṭhī: The Five Supreme Entities

6.1 A graded model of spiritual attainment

The term *parameṣṭhī* denotes one who occupies the highest station (*parama-pada*). The five categories are not arranged by rank of power but by two intersecting principles: the degree of karmic purification, and the function performed for the community. The arihanta and siddha are liberated or perfected beings (the *deva* category); the ācārya, upādhyāya, and sādhu are *guru*-level beings still on the path. Jaini (1979) describes this configuration as a ladder in which each category exemplifies a stage the aspirant may realistically aim to emulate. The mantra thereby unifies *deva* (the ideal), *guru* (the guide), and, implicitly, *dharma* (the path they embody), the triad often called the three refuges of Jain practice.

A noteworthy feature is the ordering. Logically, the siddha is the final goal and the arihanta a preceding state. Yet the mantra begins with the arihanta. The standard explanation, offered across commentarial literature, is pedagogical and ethical: the arihanta is the visible, speaking exemplar through whom the siddha state is known at all. The siddha, being bodiless and silent, cannot teach. The gratitude owed to the teacher therefore takes precedence in the sequence of salutation, though not in the metaphysical hierarchy (Dundas, 2002).

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Table 3. The Five Supreme Beings (Pañca-Parameṣṭhī) and Their Characteristics

Being	Spiritual status	Defining characteristic	Principal function	Traditional virtue-count
Arihanta	Embodied, omniscient; four destructive karmas destroyed	Infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, energy while living	Teaches the path; (as *tīrthaṅkara*) founds the community	12 (traditional)
Siddha	Fully liberated, bodiless	All karma shed; abides in liberation	Embodies the goal; models the end of rebirth	8 (traditional)
Ācārya	Monastic leader, still on the path	Mastery of conduct and leadership	Governs and guides the order	36 (traditional)
Upādhyāya	Monastic teacher	Mastery of scripture	Instructs monks and nuns in canonical learning	25 (traditional)
Sādhu / Sādhvī	Monk or nun practising the great vows	Self-restraint, equanimity, non-attachment	Practises and exemplifies the path	27 (traditional)

Note. The virtue-counts follow common traditional enumerations (the Śvetāmbara scheme of 12, 8, 36, 25, and 27, totalling 108); the Digambara and Śvetāmbara lists differ in composition and sometimes in number, and should be checked against the specific source cited in any final version (Wiley, 2004).

Table 3 shows how the mantra covers the entire spectrum from the fully liberated to the beginning practitioner. Since the *sādhu* category includes every monk and nun, the formula honours the daily, unspectacular work of renunciation as much as the supreme attainment of liberation.

6.2 Arihanta

The arihanta has destroyed the four *ghātiyā* karmas and therefore possesses *kevala-jñāna*. Jain texts distinguish the ordinary arihanta from the *tīrthaṅkara*, who in addition establishes the four-fold community and is endowed with special merit (*tīrthaṅkara-nāma-karma*). Importantly, the arihanta remains embodied until the residual *aghātiyā* karmas expire. His teaching is a spontaneous consequence of omniscience and compassion, not a response to prayer. Jain doctrine denies that the arihanta rewards or punishes; the benefit of venerating him arises from the devotee's own mental purification (Jaini, 1979; Tatia, 1951).

6.3 Siddha

The siddha has attained *mokṣa*. Jain metaphysics describes the liberated soul as retaining its individuality while manifesting its intrinsic qualities: infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. It is not absorbed into a universal reality, as in some Vedāntic views, nor extinguished, as in common readings of Buddhist *nirvāṇa*. This individuality has doctrinal significance: it affirms the plurality of souls and their eternal

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ontological status (Dundas, 2002). Siddhas are venerated as the realised end of the path, though they neither hear nor respond.

6.4 Ācārya

The ācārya heads a monastic group, transmits discipline, and is responsible for the observance of the great vows by the monks and nuns under him. He ordains, admonishes, assigns penance, and in many traditions presides over ritual. The ācārya figure illustrates the Jain emphasis on institutional continuity: without disciplined monastic leadership the path could not be maintained across generations (Dundas, 2002; Vallely, 2002).

6.5 Upādhyāya

The upādhyāya is the teacher of scripture. His role reflects the Jain commitment to right knowledge (*samyag-jñāna*): conduct divorced from understanding is considered inadequate. In the classical definition the upādhyāya is expert in the canon and capable of instructing others, making the figure a bridge between the omniscient teaching and its transmission through text.

6.6 Sādhu

The sādhu is any monk or nun who has taken the five great vows (*mahāvratas*): non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession. Traditional descriptions add the three *guptis* (restraints of mind, speech, and body) and five *samitis* (regulated activities such as careful walking). The line "in all the world" reflects the tradition's view that monastic virtue is intrinsically honourable wherever found. Observers such as Laidlaw (1995) and Vallely (2002) have shown how this ascetic ideal structures lay religious life, with lay people supporting and venerating renunciants as embodiments of values they pursue in moderated form.

Figure 2. Five supreme beings and their spiritual hierarchy



Doctrinal rank runs top to bottom; recitation begins with the teaching arihanta.

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Figure 2. Five Supreme Beings and Their Spiritual Hierarchy (schematic)

Level	Being	Position relative to liberation
Perfected (*deva*)	Siddha	Liberated; bodiless; goal of the path
Perfected (*deva*)	Arihanta	Omniscient; embodied; teaches the path
Guide (*guru*)	Ācārya	Leads the order
Guide (*guru*)	Upādhyāya	Teaches scripture
Practitioner (*guru*)	Sādhu	Practises the great vows

Reading Figure 2. The figure presents the doctrinal ranking from top to bottom. The mantra's recitation order, by contrast, begins with the arihanta, reflecting gratitude toward the teacher (Section 6.1).

7. Philosophical Foundations of the Navkar Mahāmantra

7.1 Jīva and ajīva

Jain metaphysics divides reality into *jīva* (sentient, conscious substance) and *ajīva* (the non-sentient, comprising matter, space, motion, rest, and time) (Tatia, 1994). Every soul is eternal and potentially omniscient; its obscuration arises from association with karmic matter. The five supreme beings represent five degrees of the soul's recovery of its own nature. In this way the mantra implicitly teaches that the ideal is not external: the siddha is the soul's own latent state fully manifested. The salutation is therefore a form of recognising one's own potential.

7.2 Karma theory

In Jainism karma is a subtle material substance that flows into (*āsrava*) and binds to the soul through passions and activity. Liberation requires stopping the influx (*saṃvara*) and shedding existing karma (*nirjarā*) (Tatia, 1994; Jaini, 1979). The mantra's declaration that it destroys "all sins" must be read in this framework. As argued in Section 5.3, the logic is psychological and ethical rather than magical. Reverence for beings who have transcended passion weakens the reciter's own attachment and aversion, and thereby contributes to *saṃvara*. The mantra is therefore consistent with Jainism's strongly self-reliant doctrine of karma, in which no external agent forgives or cleanses.

7.3 Moksha

The goal of the Jain path is *mokṣa*, the soul's permanent release. The mantra structures this goal as a visible series of attained states and thus functions as a condensed map of the soteriological path. Its recitation at the time of death, notably in *sallekhanā*, expresses the aspiration to leave the body with the mind fixed on liberation rather than on attachment (Laidlaw, 1995; Dundas, 2002).

7.4 The three jewels

The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* opens by stating that right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct together constitute the path to liberation (Tatia, 1994). The mantra can be read as mapping onto these. Reverence for the five beings expresses right faith (*samyag-darśana*): trust in the reality of liberation and in those who exemplify

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it. The *upādhyāya* and the arihanta's teaching correspond to right knowledge (*samyag-jñāna*). The ācārya and sādhu correspond to right conduct (*samyak-cāritra*). This correspondence is an interpretive reading offered in much modern exposition rather than a classical statement, and it is used here as an analytical heuristic.

7.5 Ahiṃsā

Ahiṃsā is the cardinal Jain principle, extending to all living beings including those with a single sense. The mantra's connection with ahiṃsā is multiple. The sādhu is defined by the vow of non-violence; the arihanta's teaching is an expression of compassion; and the very act of salutation cultivates humility, the opposite of the ego-driven aggression that Jain thought sees as the root of violence. The Jain concept of *bhāva-hiṃsā* (violence of intention) means that non-violence begins in mental states, which is where the mantra operates (Jaini, 1979; Chapple, 2002).

7.6 Anekāntavāda

Anekāntavāda, the doctrine that reality is many-sided and that any single statement captures only one aspect, is the Jain epistemological counterpart to ahiṃsā (Matilal, 1981). Its relation to the mantra is structural rather than textual. The mantra's saluting of virtue "in all the world" without naming individuals or sects expresses an inclusive reverence consistent with the refusal to absolutise one standpoint. The mantra's cross-sectarian acceptance is a practical instance of this attitude, since Digambara and Śvetāmbara disagreements about doctrine and practice do not prevent common recitation.

7.7 Aparigraha

Aparigraha, non-possession, is the fifth great vow and applies to material goods and internal attachments (*mūrcchā*). The five beings, from the siddha who has left even the body to the sādhu who holds minimal possessions, are exemplars of progressive non-attachment. The mantra also embodies aparigraha in a subtler way: it requests nothing. Many devotional traditions combine praise with petition; the Navkar expresses reverence without acquisition, even of spiritual benefits (Dundas, 2002). The concluding lines mention auspiciousness, but the logic of the mantra remains one of self-transformation, not of seeking favours.

7.8 Self-discipline and purification

Jain spirituality emphasises *tapas* (austerity), *saṃyama* (restraint), and *dhyāna* (meditation) as instruments of purification (Jaini, 1979). The mantra operates as a low-threshold entry point to this discipline: it requires no initiation, equipment, or specialised knowledge, and can be practised by laity as well as monastics.

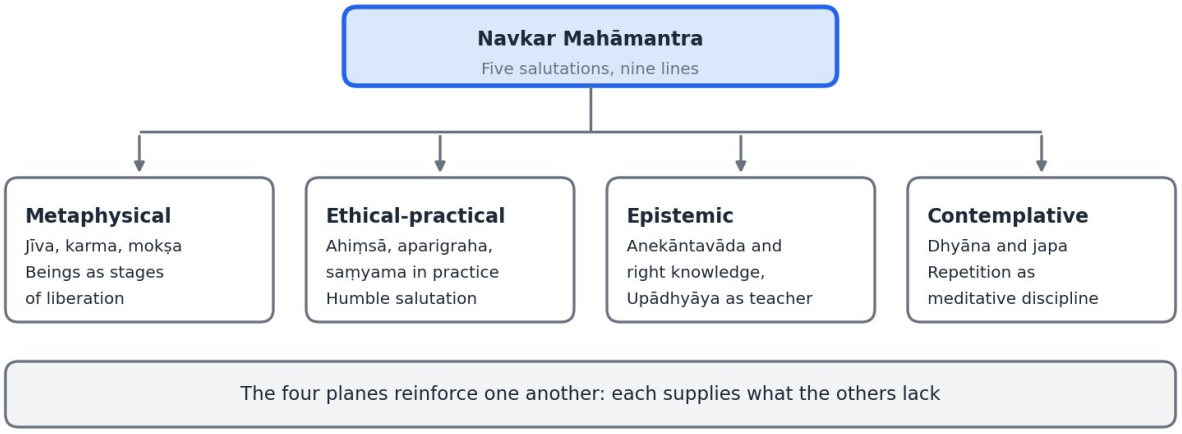
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Table 4. Philosophical Principles of Jainism and Their Relationship with the Navkar Mahāmantra

Principle	Core meaning	Relationship to the mantra	Nature of the link
Jīva / Ajīva	Sentient soul and non-sentient substances	Five beings show degrees of the soul's recovery of its nature	Doctrinal
Karma	Subtle matter binding the soul	Veneration reduces passion and thereby binding	Doctrinal, interpretive
Mokṣa	Complete liberation	Siddha is the goal; mantra recited at death	Doctrinal, ritual
Three jewels	Right faith, knowledge, conduct	Mapped onto devotion, teaching, and conduct	Interpretive heuristic
Ahiṃsā	Non-violence	Sādhu's vow; humility counters aggression	Doctrinal, ethical
Anekāntavāda	Many-sidedness of truth	Inclusive, non-sectarian reverence	Structural, interpretive
Aparigraha	Non-possession	Request-free salutation; exemplars of renunciation	Interpretive
Saṃyama / tapas	Restraint and austerity	Accessible entry to disciplined practice	Practical

Table 4 deliberately marks the *nature of the link*. The relationships with jīva, karma, and mokṣa are directly doctrinal, whereas the mapping to the three jewels and to anekāntavāda is an interpretive reading and should be regarded as such.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: the mantra works on four planes at once



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Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Navkar Mahāmantra in Jain Philosophy (schematic)

Plane	Content	Expression in the mantra
Metaphysical	Jīva, karma, mokṣa	The five beings as stages of the soul's liberation
Ethical-practical	Ahiṃsā, aparigraha, saṃyama	Sādhu and ācārya as exemplars; humility in salutation
Epistemic	Anekāntavāda, right knowledge	Upādhyāya; inclusive reverence
Contemplative	Dhyāna, *japa*	Repetition as meditative discipline

Reading Figure 1. The four planes interact. Metaphysical teaching gives the practice its meaning; ethical commitment gives it integrity; knowledge gives it orientation; contemplation makes it a lived discipline.

8. The Navkar Mahāmantra and Meditation

8.1 Traditional contemplative practice

In Jain practice the mantra is used in at least three ways: spoken recitation (*pāṭha*), silent or whispered repetition (*japa*), and contemplative visualisation in which each salutation is associated with a colour, a bodily centre, or an attribute. The last is characteristic of some modern meditative systems, such as Preksha Dhyāna, developed within the Terāpanth tradition, though specific associations vary by lineage and are not found in the early canon. Repetition is commonly done with a rosary of 108 beads. Traditionally the practice is said to cultivate concentration (*ekāgratā*), equanimity (*samāyika*), and detachment.

8.2 Mantra in comparative meditation research

Research on meditation distinguishes several families of practice, including focused attention, open monitoring, and mantra-based techniques. Meta-analytic reviews find modest benefits of meditation programmes for anxiety, depression, and stress, with effects comparable to but not clearly greater than other active treatments (Goyal et al., 2014; Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Critical reviewers caution that the field suffers from small samples, variable methods, inadequate controls, and overstated popular claims (Van Dam et al., 2018). Mindfulness-based approaches have become the dominant research paradigm (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), but mantra recitation within specific religious traditions has been studied far less.

8.3 Distinguishing traditional claims from empirical findings

An essential distinction must be maintained. Within Jain tradition, the mantra is said to destroy karma, protect against harm, and bring auspiciousness. These claims are **religious beliefs** and are not tested or testable by empirical science. Meanwhile, general research on meditation provides **cautious, indirect** support for the possibility that regular contemplative repetition may be associated with reductions in stress and improvements in attention and well-being. This research does not specifically test the Navkar, and no claim is made here that the mantra cures any disease or produces specific physiological effects. Popular assertions that the mantra heals illness, changes brain waves in particular ways, or influences cosmic energy fields are not supported by rigorous evidence and are not repeated in this paper.

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Table 5. Types of Claim About the Mantra and Their Status

Claim	Category	Evidential status
The mantra destroys karma	Religious doctrine	Matter of faith; not empirically testable
It is the foremost *maṅgala*	Religious valuation	Matter of faith
Its five salutations appear in early and medieval Jain texts	Historical	Supported by textual and epigraphic evidence (Section 4)
Repetition may support concentration and calm	Psychological hypothesis	Plausible by analogy with general meditation research; not specifically established for the Navkar
It cures disease	Therapeutic claim	Not supported by evidence

8.4 Self-reflection and inner peace

A philosophically grounded account can nonetheless be offered. The structure of the mantra directs attention away from self-concern toward admirable qualities, an exercise in what contemporary psychology would describe as self-transcendent, other-directed attention. The repeated acknowledgement of exemplars may foster humility and gratitude, and the intention to emulate them gives practice a reflective, ethical direction. These are hypotheses consistent with Jain doctrine and compatible with broader psychology; they remain to be tested empirically.

8.5 Digambara and Śvetāmbara usage

Both traditions share the five salutations and regard the mantra as the supreme *maṅgala*. The differences are of recension, emphasis, and context rather than of doctrine. They include minor orthographic and dialectal variation in the Prakrit (Section 5.1); differences in which of the nine lines are treated as integral to the recited *mahāmantra*; differing enumerations of the virtues of the five beings; and distinct liturgical settings, such as the place of the mantra in the Śvetāmbara *āvassaya* (obligatory daily rites) and in Digambara temple worship and scriptural opening invocations (Dundas, 2002; Jaini, 1979; Sangave, 1980). Sectarian disputes over monastic nudity and the liberation of women (Jaini, 1991) bear on the interpretation of the *sādhu* category, since Digambaras hold that women cannot attain liberation directly, but both groups venerate their respective monks and nuns, and in practice the mantra is recited jointly in many inter-sect settings.

9. Ethical and Social Significance

Jain ethics is not a set of rules attached to a separate belief system; it is the core of the path itself. The mantra's ethical significance lies in the fact that what it honours is, above all, a way of living. Each of the five beings is defined by conduct, knowledge, or liberation resulting from conduct, and none by power over others or by wealth.

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Three ethical orientations deserve emphasis. First, **humility**. The word *ṇamo* enacts a bodily and mental lowering of the self. In a tradition that identifies pride (*māna*) as one of the four passions (*kaṣāyas*) that bind karma, a daily act of salutation is a systematic discipline against self-aggrandisement (Jaini, 1979). Second, **universal reverence for virtue**. The mantra honours qualities rather than persons, and it does so "in all the world". It therefore models a form of moral recognition that is not confined by caste, ethnicity, or sect. Third, **non-violence as the horizon of action**. Because the sādhu and the arihanta are defined by non-violence and compassion, the recitation keeps ahiṃsā continually in view as the shape of the ideal life.

The social implications follow from these orientations. Jain communities have historically emphasised vegetarianism, careful occupational choice to minimise harm, charitable giving, and the protection of animals (Cort, 2001; Laidlaw, 1995). The mantra is part of the religious culture that sustains these commitments. Its non-theistic structure has a further social consequence: because no deity is invoked to favour one group, the mantra does not generate in-group and out-group claims of divine election. Environmental responsibility is likewise grounded in the Jain view that all living beings, including plants and microorganisms, have souls and are entitled to non-injury, a connection extensively explored in the volume edited by Chapple (2002).

These claims should be stated with care. The mantra does not itself guarantee ethical behaviour; Jain communities, like others, exhibit gaps between ideal and practice, and ritual recitation can become habitual or merely devotional. The argument here is that the mantra *articulates and rehearses* an ethical orientation, which may support moral formation where it is accompanied by understanding and practice.

Table 6. Ethical and Social Values Reflected in the Navkar Mahāmantra

Value	Where it appears	Social implication
Humility	Act of salutation (*ṇamo*)	Counter to ego and status competition
Compassion and non-violence	Arihanta's teaching; sādhu's vows	Respect for all life; ethical consumption and occupation
Universal respect	"In all the world" (*loe savva*)	Inclusivity beyond sect, caste, or nation
Non-possession	Request-free salutation; renunciant exemplars	Restraint of consumption; sustainability
Reverence for knowledge	Upādhyāya	Value of learning and teaching
Tolerance of plural views	Cross-sect recitation; link with *anekāntavāda*	Interfaith and intra-faith dialogue
Gratitude	Ordering that begins with the teaching arihanta	Recognition of dependence on teachers and community

Table 6 summarises how each value connects to specific features of the text. The final column is offered as a reasoned implication from Jain doctrine, not as an empirically demonstrated effect.

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Figure 3. Relationship Between the Navkar Mahāmantra, Spiritual Development, and Ethical Transformation (schematic)

Stage	Process	Outcome
1. Recitation and reflection	Salutation of the five beings with understanding	Reverence; reduced self-centredness
2. Internalisation	Contemplating the beings' qualities as one's own potential	Aspiration toward the three jewels
3. Practice	Vows, restraint, study, and compassionate conduct (at lay or monastic level)	*Saṃvara* and *nirjarā*; ethical transformation
4. Orientation toward liberation	Progressive detachment	*Mokṣa* (the traditional goal)

Reading Figure 3. The sequence is conceptual rather than strictly chronological, and the stages recur and overlap in actual practice. The figure represents the Jain claim that devotion without conduct is incomplete, and that conduct without reverence and understanding is unstable.

10. The Navkar Mahāmantra in Contemporary Society

10.1 Education and character formation

Jain schools and community programmes routinely teach the mantra to children, often as the first element of religious education. Its brevity, rhythmic structure, and conceptual density make it suitable for introducing both language and values. Educationally, the mantra offers a means to open discussions of virtue, gratitude, and non-violence. Any claims that it improves academic performance or cognitive ability, however, lack evidence and should not be asserted.

10.2 Professional ethics and leadership

The values reflected in the mantra, including humility, restraint, honesty, and concern for the consequences of one's actions on others, align with contemporary discussions of ethical leadership and responsible business. The Jain mercantile tradition has long articulated economic ethics rooted in non-possession and

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non-harm (Laidlaw, 1995). It would be an overreach to claim that reciting the mantra makes one an ethical professional. A more defensible claim is that it provides a vocabulary and a regular practice of reflection on which ethical commitments can draw.

10.3 Stress management and emotional balance

Given the general research on meditation reviewed in Section 8, individuals may reasonably find mantra repetition calming. The available evidence supports only modest and heterogeneous effects of meditation overall (Goyal et al., 2014; Van Dam et al., 2018), and there are no robust trials specific to the Navkar. The mantra should therefore be viewed as a spiritual practice that may offer personal comfort, not as a clinical intervention, and it should never replace professional medical or psychological care where needed.

10.4 Interfaith dialogue and global peace

The mantra's non-theistic, virtue-centred form makes it a potentially useful resource in interfaith dialogue, because it does not require shared belief in a deity. The Jain principles of ahiṃsā and anekāntavāda have been invoked in discussions of peaceful coexistence and the management of intellectual disagreement (Matilal, 1981; Cort, 2001). Peace, however, is a political and social achievement as well as a spiritual aspiration; the mantra can contribute dispositions of humility and non-aggression but cannot by itself resolve structural conflict.

Table 7. Contemporary Applications of Jain Philosophical Principles Associated with the Mantra

Domain	Relevant principle	Possible application	Caution
Education	Reverence for knowledge, humility	Character education; reflective practice	No evidence for academic gains
Professional ethics	Aparigraha, ahiṃsā	Responsible business; harm-minimisation	Ritual does not guarantee ethical conduct
Mental well-being	*Japa*, contemplative attention	Personal calm and reflection	Evidence is indirect; not a clinical treatment
Environment	Ahiṃsā toward all life forms	Sustainability, animal welfare, reduced consumption	Practice varies across communities
Dialogue and peace	Anekāntavāda	Respectful pluralism	Requires institutional and political action as well

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11. Comparative Philosophical Perspective

Comparison is useful for clarifying what is distinctive about the Navkar, provided that similarities are not mistaken for identity.

Buddhist meditation. Buddhist practice includes recollection of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha (*anussati*) and the taking of refuge, which bear a structural resemblance to the Navkar's veneration of liberated and exemplary beings (Gethin, 1998; Anālayo, 2003). Both emphasise ethical conduct and mental training. The differences are doctrinal: Buddhism denies a permanent self (*anātman*), whereas Jainism affirms eternal individual souls (*jīva*); the Buddhist goal is *nirvāṇa* as the cessation of craving, whereas the Jain goal is the soul's recovery of its inherent qualities. Jain karma is also a material substance, unlike the primarily intentional karma of Buddhist analysis.

Hindu mantra traditions. In many Hindu traditions mantras are understood as sonic embodiments of divine reality, whose correct pronunciation has intrinsic efficacy, and are often addressed to particular deities (Alper, 1989; Flood, 1996). The Navkar differs in that it addresses no creator or deity, requests nothing, and has no initiation requirement in its common use. Parallels exist in the use of *japa* with a rosary and the value placed on sacred sound, and some Jain traditions, especially in medieval currents influenced by tantric practice, developed additional mantra practices, but the core logic of the Navkar remains reverential and ethical, not theurgic.

Other Indian philosophical approaches. Like Sāṃkhya and Yoga, Jainism posits a multiplicity of souls and a path of disciplined practice, yet it differs in its theory of karma as matter and its absolute commitment to ahiṃsā. Compared with Advaita Vedānta's non-dual realisation, the Jain view preserves plurality and individuality even in liberation (Dundas, 2002).

These comparisons do not support a claim that the traditions teach the same thing. They show a common Indian concern with liberation through ethical and contemplative discipline, within different metaphysical frameworks.

12. Critical Discussion

Philosophical depth. The mantra's strength is its compression. In nine short lines it encodes a theory of spiritual types, a model of the path, a doctrine of non-theistic devotion, and an ethic of humility. Its apparent paradox, a mantra that destroys sin within a tradition that denies external salvation, resolves, as argued above, when karmic cleansing is understood as the effect of changed dispositions. A critical reader may still note that traditional language invites a more literal, efficacy-oriented reading, and that popular practice often adopts it. The scholar's task is to describe both the philosophically sophisticated reading and the lived, sometimes magical, one without collapsing them (Cort, 2001).

Textual uncertainty. The precise formative history of the mantra remains uncertain. Epigraphic evidence confirms early veneration of arahantas and siddhas, but the full formula's stages of development, the relative age of the concluding lines, and the circumstances of its standardisation are not definitively established. Claims of high precision are not warranted.

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Empirical limitations. There is a serious gap between the volume of devotional claims about the mantra and the amount of rigorous research on it. Most available discussions are theological, popular, or based on small, uncontrolled studies. General meditation research is itself contested (Van Dam et al., 2018). Rigorous work would require pre-registered, adequately controlled studies, attention to expectancy and religious-belief effects, and careful measurement.

Interpretive plurality. Contemporary interpreters range from monastic commentators emphasising ritual merit, to modern reformers (including in the Preksha tradition) emphasising meditation, to academic writers emphasising ethics and social function. Each captures part of the phenomenon. A further critical issue is gender: the mantra honours *sādhus* (including *sādhvīs*), yet the sects differ on the spiritual status of women, so that its universality is mediated by sectarian doctrine (Jaini, 1991).

Limitations of this study. As a secondary-source study with an unverified recent literature, this paper cannot claim to have exhausted the scholarship, and its interpretive correlations (notably Table 4) are offered for scholarly evaluation.

13. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Navkar Mahāmantra is best understood as a condensed philosophical and ethical statement as well as a devotional formula. Historically, its five-fold salutation is attested in early epigraphic and textual contexts, though precise dating and authorship remain unestablished. Philosophically, it maps the stages of the soul's liberation and the roles of those who guide others toward it, and it harmonises with Jain doctrines of jīva, karma, mokṣa, the three jewels, ahiṃsā, anekāntavāda, and aparigraha. Ethically, it rehearses humility, universal respect for virtue, and non-violence without invoking a deity or seeking favours. In meditation it offers a simple and accessible contemplative focus, whose psychological benefits can at present be discussed only by cautious analogy with general meditation research. Its continuing relevance lies in providing a shared, non-sectarian, non-theistic symbol of aspiration across Jain communities and a resource for contemporary reflection on compassion, restraint, and pluralism.

14. Future Research Directions

Several lines of inquiry could extend this work. (1) Philological and manuscript studies tracing the formation of the nine-line text, its variants, and the relationship between the five salutations and the concluding lines. (2) Ethnographic research on how lay and monastic Jains understand and use the mantra, including gender and sectarian differences. (3) Psychological research using pre-registered, controlled designs to test specific, modest hypotheses about attention, affect, and prosocial attitudes, with appropriate comparison conditions. (4) Education studies examining how teaching the mantra with explanation of its values influences moral reasoning. (5) Sustainability and peace studies exploring how Jain concepts of ahiṃsā and aparigraha, as expressed in religious practice, relate to environmental behaviour and conflict transformation. (6) Comparative studies of devotional recollection practices across Indian traditions that avoid both over-assimilation and exoticism.

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