Islamic Media and the Muslim Public Spheres in India The Case of Zakir Naik's Peace TV[1]

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With the rise of an anti-secular (not post) politics in the West, gates of secularism are being jettisoned. Politics moving around 'Islamicness' or politics of religiosity is trying to occupy the secularly constructed public spheres. This trend observed that the Christian preaching on television was one of the attractive methods, has changed its form through various means of development in communicative technologies. However, considering the intellectual gap, given by both secular modernity and Western religiousperformativity, Islamic media emerges as one of the recent development tried to address anxieties of the modern/secular on the one hand, and rational/religious/Islamic on the other. It is organised to recast Muslim subjectivities and highlights biased interpretation of secularism championed by the West. The major project of the Islamic media is to valorise the Islamicness; its heritage, culture and intellectual developments along with an ideological slot it uses in in its various presentations. In Islamic media, the idea of 'Islamicness' is responsible to generate Muslim public spheres. Exchange of ideas in Muslim public spheres and its reintroduction through various forms of audible, visual and interactive media delineate this kind of genre as Islamic, equally capable to adjust itself in major modern worldviews namely left and right. Surprisingly, the process of adjustment never loses its independent structuration and distribution of knowledge even in societies known for plural assemblage of religious authorities. The very feature of 'Islamicness' neither tries to offend ideological syncretism countries such as India celebrates nor ventures to destruct the societal imagination where goodness plays immense role. For example, in India, one can observe various Islamic or Muslim media presentations for a mixed/cultural audience. Those presentations often run by Muslim channels and Islamic satellites. By providing a neutral Muslim image in presence of biased global imaginary of *a Muslim* in rapidly growing media industries, one notices the formation of rational behaviour in societies predominantly inhabited by mixed people of different faith is influencing overall framework of intellectualism or popular intellectualism.

This piece will try to locate the phenomenon of Islamic preaching through media which is identified as Islamic media or televangelism, an important aspect in the realm of popular religion in India. In response to engage with Islamic media, one finds deliberate articulation of Islamic discourses in public sphere. So far, popular religion is related, it is understood as what is shared by the people[2] in general, across all social boundaries. The popularly shared perception of the religion is being reconnected through an emerging role of the media-based performance of religion and consequentially generates discourses of various kind.

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[1] This paper tries to reflect upon the formation of religious space which Zakir Naik provided to Indian society. For me, it tried to readjust secular function of the reason in society since it is compatible with Indian cultures, nonetheless, he introduced 'a religious reason' performing in public. Nowhere, this paper seeks to repair political outcry which virtually exiled him. Rather it highlights that the formation of Muslim public sphere also requires Muslim performativity often known as *taqwa* (piety).

[2] Teiser, F Stephen. (1995), 'Popular Religion', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp. 378-395, see also Storey, John. (2015), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (seventh edition), London: Routledge. Williams, Raymond. (1986), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Having the form of mediatized religion, Islamic use of media is becoming popular in current media sphere. It takes its structural inspiration from Christian Televangelism first emerged in the United States of America. As televangelism is a term popularised by Jeffery K Hadden and Swann[3], is a hybrid concept from the words 'television' and 'evangelism' that stands to use television as a mean to propagate the Christian faith.[4] Islamic televangelism is an imitation of that Christian televangelism to propagate Islam; creates a Muslim space of deliberation called Islamic/Muslim public sphere.

In this connection, the phenomenon of Mumbai based doctor-preacher Zakir Abdul Karim Naik, b. 1965 is noticeable. He is famous for his Islamic television channel 'Peace TV', launched on ArabSat, satellite Badr 3, October 2006 and broadcast globally from Dubai, UAE. It addresses mainly Sunni Muslims known as Salafis who claim to follow the ideas and practices of the righteous ancestors (*al-salaf al sālih*) and advocates back to the Quran and Sunnah by using *ijtihād*, independent reasoning. Hence they reject *taqlīd* which they denounce as blind following of traditional religious interpretations. The audience of the channel mainly comes from India, Pakistan, China, West Asia, South Africa, United Kingdom and United State of America. The channel uses modern means of television technique to present Islamic lectures and other live programmes for youth and educational programmes for children for the propagation of Islam (da'wa). Intellectually the message is based on texts which are important in the context of Salafi argumentation. Zakir Naik's argumentation moreover often refers to the literature of the Ahl-e-Hadīth, the school of thought which introduced Salafi ideas into South Asia in the 19th century. His methodology to define Islam and to remove the misconceptions about Islam made him popular worldwide. His transnational TV channel caused to increase a communicative Salafi deliberation and Salafi-subjectivity to promote their *aqīda*(religious creed).

Though, most of Naik's public lectures make references of popular culture from American women to BMW car, from having a boyfriend for a Muslim teen, rape, terrorism, secularism, media oriented irrationalities and atrocities, morality, development of medical sciences, theories of evolution, Darwin, Einstein to debating biblical theology and Hindu scriptures. His idea of Peace TV is civic and global in terms of its 'imagined' Islamic paradigm as his vision of using media plays an important role for providing a space to Salafis. On his television channel, Zakir Naik impresses his audience by using his rhetorical skills, and through his ability to compare world religions, for instance, his verbatim citation from religious scriptures and texts, and to refer aspects of science, modernity and its relevance with Islam. Thus, he attempts to rationalize the Salafi discourse as a belief-system based on reason and logic rather than merely following religious texts bearing the content of *taqlīd*, which is a recent phenomenon in the Salafi context. Simultaneously, a deliberative space is created which is supposed to visualize a 'peaceful global Islam' to counter the image of Salafism as being violent and associated with terrorism. In doing so, he willy-nilly re-launches intellectually hyper rebuttals of the colonial period related to the different Muslim school of thoughts like Ahl-e-Hadīth vs. Barelvi or Shi'i, Sufi or Deobandi from South Asian Muslim religious set up.[5] By observing the reach of Naik's lectures through his television channel Peace TV and other new media techniques[6], its popularity from China to Saudi Arabia,

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[3] Jeffery k Hadden and Charles E Swann. (1981), *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, Addison Wesley, pp.71-76.

[4] James, Jonathan D. (2010), *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics: Televangelism in Contemporary India,* New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp.2-3.

[5] Sikand, Yoginder. (2011), 'Dr. Zakir Naik: 'Islamic media' mogul faces new foes', Accessed on 26/08/2016, *http://www.ummid.com/news/2011/January/13.01.2011/zakir_naik_facing_new_foes.htm*

[6] The Indian Express listed him among the 100 Most Powerful Indians of 2010, Newspaper reports "The evangelist, who wears suits and ties and preaches Islam in English, is a powerful orator. His sermons on Peace TV-English boast of a viewership of 100 million. The channel is aired in more than 125 countries and was launched in North America. He also launched Peace TV Urdu, which has 50 million viewers. In the last 14 years, Naik has given more 1,300 public talks, including 100 in 2009…. Naik's 10-days ―Peace Conference, November, 2009, in Mumbai was attended by a million people. His lecture at the same conference was attended by around 2 Lac, including former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim", ―The Most Powerful Indians in 2010, *The Indian Express*. February 5, 2010. Accessed on 27/08/2016, *http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-most-powerful-indians-in-2010-no.-8190/575690/4*

America to Bangladesh make sense of a kind of 'popular Salafism' as an emerging new religion; interrogates secular public sphere through its traditional-modern dichotomy of self-presentation in public.[7]

Taking the benefit of modernity, Naik explains religious texts and practices *vis-à-vis* assumptions, conceptions and misconceptions about Islam, for example, Naik's Programme on Peace TV *Truth Exposed*, *Dare to Ask* and *Crossfire*. Thus he artfully presents and constructs a Salafi-defined identity. In this regard, globalization in many ways opened the gate to actualize religious imagination as in the case of Islam with textual and non-textual paradoxes. As in this case, television and new media play an important role, though East-West, presentation and misrepresentation rhetoric of Islams; provided new consciousness of protean kind of religious activism. With the emergence of new media, consciousness of Islam and Islamic knowledge engendered with domesticating sense of communicative technologies to justify tradition and authority through a so-called rational 'paradigmatic shift' in a Muslim society. It also tended to *re-narrate* hegemony, whether local or global, by countering or replacing the existing one. In the case of Zakir Naik, he talks about American hegemony, global politics of Salafi-Wahhabi violence; restores debate of 7th century Islam, often cites literatures by Salafi religious scholars or those who are weighed as Saudi intellectuals worldwide like Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d.855), Ibn Taymiyya (1328), Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab (d.1792) Al-Bani (d.1999), Abdullah Ibn Baaz (d. 1999) and so on. He defends Saudi Arabia as a city of peace by providing various textual justifications and contextualizes Salafi style *ijtihād* as directly inspiredfrom the time of Prophet Muhammad. As many other presenters on Peace TV like Yusuf Estes (USA), Bilal Philips (Canada), Nisar Nadiadwala, RafeequeMadani (India), Hussein Ye (China) and others try to advocate that Islam is more than a religion; an up to date social system and Saudi Arabia somehow is an important participant in maintaining the global peace. In this way, they become the most active part of Saudi public, simultaneously restore rhetoric of pristine Islam; creates Muslim/Salafi public sphere where debates of cosmopolitan practicing Muslim is more important rather than a cultural one. In the whole process, *halal* (religiously allowed) aspects of suitability of new means of communication and technology or new media provided an aesthetically inclusive shift in the perspective of Salafis from technophobes (also perceiving technology as a form of materiality) to technophiles. Thus, new media functioned as boomerang, instead producing influence from rational-Enlightenment kind of Western narratives it worked as tool on the pattern of polemically traditional religious imagination. Through religious mediation of Peace TV, Naik intended to neutralize the global Salafi image adhered with 9/11; re-enchanted textualist politics of civilizing Salafi mission. However, borrowing Charles Taylor's term the 'metatopicality' which "tries to state what the public sphere was. It was a new metatopical space, in which members of society could exchange ideas and come to a common mind". Naik's Metatopicality of common/universal good in the public sphere started by Peace TV is 'unadulterated' Islam/Salafism in contemporary world.[8]

II

Zakir Naik's support to Salafi narrative of Islam is an important point in the discourses of religious emergence. In this regard, the paradigmatic shift in world's perception of Salafis is hugely noticed after 9/11. It also led to find easily the discourses of Salafism available in European public sphere. Naik's presentation is very much unconventional in terms of following non-European televangelist practices. There is no sense or context of *darsana*[9], or enlightment in his formulae of preaching. As in most of live telecast, he invites people to accept Islam also contains a process of debate along with distinct kind of "liveness"; shows experiencing the triumph of Islam over other religions. This "liveness" can be related with the very idea of *Islamicness* upon that Zaik's success is based. His prime focus is to apply reason in order to justify discourses of purity, original and peaceful Islam. He intends to Islamize media, having the pain of conspiracy against Islam through established visual regimes of the American media, he declares to make Islamic media 'purer' and 'popular'. The impetus behind this idea of popular is of course motivated by *da'wa* engagement worldwide. Believing Ahmad Deedat as his ideal who inspired him in 90s in an interaction with him in Mumbai[10], he studied comparative religion to purpose a global character of peaceful Islam. Deedat himself called Naik as *Deedat Plus*. The idea of Naik's Peace TV and other of his lectures is primarily intended to show the theological similarities believing in One

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[7] Ismail, Salwa. (2008), 'Muslim Public Self-Presentation; Interrogating the Liberal Public Sphere', *PS: Political Science and Politics,* Vol.41 No.1, pp. 25-29.

[8] Taylor, Charles (2007), *A Secular Age,* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 195-97.

[9]The sight of the holy person is auspicious and thought to convey merit, see, Flood, Gavin D. (2011),"Miracles in Hinduism*",* inTwelftree, Graham H., *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[10] Larkin, Brian. (2008), 'Ahmed Deedat and Islamic Evangelism', *Social Text*, 96, Vol. 26, No. 3, p.103.

God, debating right and wrong in Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. For instance, he takes Hijab as a controversial issue in the West, gives many references from Bible, Torah even from Hindu scriptures as an instruction from God. He showcases development of Western sciences as a continuation of Islamic science in order to convince his audience.

III

The important point which leads to the study of this particular area is that media performance of Zakir Naik, in the name of 'removing misconception' about Islam goes beyond national boundaries. It targets what they perceive as a homogenous English speaking Muslims, educated in secular universities as his prime audience.[11] This observation in popular religious arena, says that Islamic media such as Peace TV of Zakir Naik is creating 'Muslim public spheres' which along with education Muslim population includes Indian middle class. As above mentioned theological discourses focused to practice Islam in a way as during the time of Prophet Muhammad Muslims did, and that is an example for the rest of Muslim generations.

Though, Habermas defined public sphere as "a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest took place"[12] but he also dedicated to show the enormous potentiality of bourgeois public sphere as many scholars suggest. Nancy Fraser and others have produced a substantial critique of Habermasian idea of bourgeois public sphere.[13] But with a very specific focus on Muslim public sphere we intend to say that the nature of Muslim public sphere especially in 19th and 20th century was very much centered on the idea of reform (*islah*), reflected in thoughts of Afghani (d.1897), Rashid Rida (d.1935) and Abduh (d.1905), also influenced Indian Muslim thinkers like Allama Shibly (d.1914) Maulana Azaad (d.1958) and Maulana Maududi (d.1979).

During 1960s and 70s most of the Muslim societies saw a transformation in the existing public sphere and where, by the advent of new means of media and technologies, individuals started questioning the religious authorities at all. In the process, Daniel Learner during his project on modernization asked, particularly, Arab Muslims to choose either Mecaa or mechanization, if they want progress.[14] It was a process as Salvatore and Eickelman discussed Islamic public sphere as "public Islam" which shares the diversity of intellectual trends in the realm of Islam in public life.[15] Contextualizing the discourse of public in Muslim societies, Charles Hirschkind noticed the importance of cassette-culture in creating a counter-public in Egypt which interrogates the practices of the public sociability tied to the production and consumption of "cassette sermons". Benefitting from pious entertainment which is the recorded speech of *khutaba* (Islamic preaches) and has become a popular technique for the cultivation of Islamic virtues, led a piety oriented

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[11] He also introduced Peace TV in Urdu, Bangla (22 April, 2011) and Chinese (29 December, 2015) languages.

[12] Jürgen, Habermas. (1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. xi.

[13] One of the main criticisms of Habermas' public sphere is its "Eurocentric" bias in the sense that it has its roots in Western Europe during the seventeenth century, and it derived its meaning from the Enlightenment values of modernity that characterized that era. Among these values were that "all citizens were of equal worth (equality); everyone should be treated fairly (justice); everyone should have control over their own lives (freedom); and everyone had a right to a basic level of material welfare (comfort)."In response to this criticism, we take the stand that the values are universal, but that societies differ in how these values are defined, weighed, and put into practice. There are several nonwestern societies that enjoy at least some of these values, and even people
in nonwestern societies that are deprived of these values yearn to attain them. For further look an article by Fraser, Nancy. (1990), 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text,* No. 25/25.

[14] Learner, Daniel. (1964), *The Passing of Traditional Society,* New York: The Free press, p. 405. See also Hobsbawm's conception of the "invented tradition" also encompasses to both tradition and modernity by justifying the current developments of past practices. Muslims inspiration from Golden Age as the age *Khilafa al-Rashida* (rightly guided caliphs) can be contextualized as "invented tradition", as it is reported as the dream of the Salafism. The message of Islam and passage of its followers recovered communicative hold through New Media. Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence ed. (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.1-14.

[15] Salvatore, Armando and Eickelman, F Dale ed. (2006), *Public Islam and the Common Good*, Leiden: Brill, p. xiv.

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public sociability[16]. Reetz reads the role of Islam in Indian public sphere which focuses on the religious groups in India between1900-1947. He explains the Muslim interaction with modernity resulted to make an inward look that brought endeavours for reform within the Muslim community. Sandria Freitag [17]made a relook on 'public sphere' by replacing it with "public arenas" which emphasizes over the collective public ritual as a way constituting and capturing public arenas.[18] While, Jon Anderson reflects that in contemporary Muslim world, the massification of the education has given wider access both to the text of Islam and its wider interpretation than developed in mosques (*masajed*) and universities (*madaris*). In these locations, an online public emerge with previously discrete sources.[19]

The major impetus to inquire into Muslim public spheres is not only related with that how television is a medium to instruct with certain traditional principles, but it is more related to the idea that how successfully it communicated with audiences apart from homogenous Muslims. In this context, it is believed that tele-visual performances are worthless without opening an interdependent linkage with new media. Here, I intend to trace certain points; firstly, Naik arranges live programmes with religious representative of other religion for instance he invited, Shri Shri Ravi Shankar, Dr. William Cambell[20] a famous embryologist, Arun Shourie and various others. He also speaks on the right of woman in Islam and compares them with Western civilization, and with other religion, simultaneously, discloses that the problem is with cultures which violate the rights of women rather than with Islam. Thus he makes a platform for debating abandoned 'rationality' of religion[21] as such. Secondly, the sort of authority he claims over Islam is a product which brought up by communicative transformation at large. In response, he received detestation from established Muslim authority in India as in 2004 Mufti Mahmudul Hasan BulandShahri issued a fatwa that watching television is forbidden in Islam including Islamic one, because television principally was a mean for entertainment. In this case, Naik challenges existing religious authority. [22] Thirdly, Naik's influence in broader Indian pop culture (Mahesh Bhatt and many from Nadiadwala family) also making its space, brought new changes among youngsters and practicing Muslims who were much familiar with sort of Islam which Naik speaks; means common uses of reason. The use of reason in Naik's language invites many to critique him on Wall Street journal and put him in media-presented notoriety as Salafism. Further his popular reception among educated Muslim and non-Muslim public is often ignored. (NDTV and Abu Dhabi 2013 award, Man of the Year). Fourthly, the search for asserting the identity in the world accumulated by modernity, Muslims (mostly urban) groped for new ways of the expression. Gary Bunt's idea of Cyber-Islamic Environment (CIE) seems purposeful to discuss that "acknowledges diversity among and within different zones in cyberspace which represent varied Muslim worldviews with the house of Islam, all of them presented a referral point of identity with a conceptualization of Islam. The source encoding of such 'Environments' follow specific protocols of identity with particular Islamic reference point including essential beliefs shared by the majority". Further he discussed iMuslims which focuses on

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[16]Hirshkind, Charles. (2006), *The Ethical Soundscape: Casette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, New York: Columbiana University press, pp.105-142.

[17] In her case studies of contestation of Muslim identity in India, Freitag tried to highlight the local and public nature of the process.

[18] Cited in Reetz, Deitrich. (2006), *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India 1900-1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 18-19. See also Freitag, Sandra (1990), *Collective Action and Community: public Arenas and Emergence of Communalism in North India,* New Delhi:Oxford University Press.

[19] The presence of Islamic ideas on internet has an orientation of mixed intellectual techniques and persons are not divided into the senders and receivers. It formed a sense of community called "virtual" this is a social communicative sphere more capable to "creolos" that Benedict Anderson identified as civic public that arose without prior design with the earlier spread of print capitalism. Internet and its surroundings enthusiastically call a "cyberspace" and envision a new "information age", See for further, Anderson, Benedict. (2006), *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.

[20] Naik, Zakir (2000, April), *The Quran and the Bible in the Light of Science*, (video), presented by Islamic Circle of North America, Accessed on 25, 09, 2016, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk61hslLHlw*

[21] The recent media trial of Zakir Naik and related governmental atrocities against him leads to an understanding that Naik's very idea of the abandoned rationality of the religion; meant to be able at a platform of dialogue and communicate with each other, resultantly opens a politico-religious fire at him, suggest to the shrinking space of a pluralist Indian society.

[22] Sikand, Yoginder. (2006), "Deoband's War on Television: Fury over Fatwa", *ISIM,* Review 17.

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mercurial; I in iMuslims stands for interoperability, evoking a sense of a variety of programs and create a fandom for popular computer products. Such as iPod, Mac, iPhone, iPhoto, iTunes and iMovie.[23] This shift is opening a new market to use new means of circulating the idea of Islam which Naik speaks, as he has declared for 'peace gadget' for Islamic sermons and literatures available in the market.

Zakir Naik seems successful in promoting his version of Islam as it has a remarkable influence on Indian society including Bollywood. The experience of a Mumbai-based MurcyleenPeerzada's journey from YRF to IRF is quoted here.

"I was a complete Westernized girl adopting the very style and the way of living. My father was a close friend of late Yash Chopra. He introduced me to him and I started working at *Yash Raj Films* as the assistant director. My first project was Salman Khan Starrer *Ek Tha Tiger*. Everyone had to admit my skills in the film making. Later on, during the making of *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, Yash Chopra passed away. That was the real shock for me as he was like my grandfather."Mursaleen said that she was offered work in YRF under Manish Sharma. "The crew tested me for film. I was asked to face cameras but something somewhere in me rebuked my conscience. I stood in front of the lights like a dead one sans any expressions and understood that the city is hell bent upon exposing women at the worst. I left for my home and did nothing for a long," she said.

"Later I got a book written by Dr Zakir Naik. The script changed me within. I told my father that I am joining *Islamic Research Foundation* (IRF). I met with the wife of Dr Naik (Farhat *Aapa*). I joined their school and for six months, my dress and my lifestyle didn't change but later I started covering myself with *Hijab*. Life changed and I can now say with certainty that the glamorous life of films is no way a right choice for a women. Only Islam can give women regard, respect and status," Mursaleen believes. She added, "Islam is the best way of living; nothing would be its substitute.[24]"

Conclusion:

Despite having a rich content where religion or versions of religion flourish, one could raise very sensitive claims upon the textual contents of Peace TV as competitive narrative claims that it is biased, anti-national and anachronistic. But the whole project of Naik's Peace TV is neither to wrestle with national sentiments nor wish to play with intra-sectarian conflicts. Rather it is about chewing the western pride namely, use of reason and updating it with the grand narrative of Islam, Quran and Sunnah. This, amid the journalistic jabbering about fundamentalism nowhere tries to defeat the liberalism or instrumentalised the so-called defeated-enlightenment[25] for making the context of Islam stronger and performative. Instead, he unraveled the textual politics behind the overladen interpretation of the fight between good and bad. Genealogically, Naik's *da'wa* performance is Christian but scripturally it is more integrative and absorptive than secular narratives. This sort of endeavors, obviously, use liberal/secular kind of understanding of Islam, on the one hand while on the other, put Islamic contents, simultaneously counter those rationalities which were used to dehumanise Islam in the aftermath of 9/11, at work. Further, through this reading we could see that the formation of 'Islamicness' through the tele-visual 'liveness' pauses public to reflect upon the case of Salafism/fundamentalism. Thus, a degree of normalization, or not-that-much hate which Western media presents, is provided to the persons who adhered with this or similar to this belief. The concluding analysis also leads us to an understanding of Muslim public spheres in India where men of other believes also share their worldviews.

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