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The Chitrakars in Naya: Emotion and the Ways of Remembrance

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Introduction

The Patuas are a community of painters living in the eastern part of India, West Bengal. Patuas or Chitrakars have been practicing *patachitra* or *patashilpa* for centuries. Patachitra or patashilpa is a form of scroll painting. Their diverse repertoire includes tales from Hindu mythology, tribal folklore, as well as Islamic tradition. They paint their stories on long scrolls and sing, as the scroll is unrolled frame by frame. The community of Patuas is spread over many districts of pre-partitioned Bengal: Mursidabad, Bankura, South Twenty-four-Parganas etc (including present-day Bangladesh). Today there are only a few practicing Patuas. Most of them live in the Indian districts of Medinipur and Birbhum (West Bengal). Even in Medinipur, the Patuas are giving up their art and taking to carpentry and farming. The market for *pats* has shrunk and the income has declined. Unlike these settlements, in the Patua *para* in Naya, the tradition of painting *patachitra* continues even today. This article will be a case study of a Patua village, called Naya, located at the western part of Medinipur, West Bengal, India.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the methodology of oral history and to show how emotion plays an important role in it. I have used both structured and unstructured interviews to understand the sentiment behind the way one remembers the past. I have kept my questions to a minimum, for fear of producing guided answers. Basic questions, which have been used in my questionnaire, are: when did the Patuas come to this land and where did they come from? Why do they use the surname Chitrakar? The mode of interaction was conversational rather than based

upon pre-fixed questions. In the process, I learnt about the diversity of responses to one question, and observed how the precise or imprecise nature of these answers too was important to my understanding. The stories they told were always what they wanted to remember, so it is always a reconstruction of the past. In case of these Patuas, we will also see how their memories reflect their self-consciousness. Therefore, a very important focus of this study is the nature of memory itself and its relation with emotion. While reading memory as a source material, one cannot do away with the influence of emotion. The selectivity of remembrance has mostly been guided by the sentiment of the interviewee. Good, bad, whatever we remember is part of our present emotional state of mind. In the course of the essay, it will appear that the Patuas' present social, economic and political condition determined their remembrance.

In this way, this essay will further illustrate how history, memory and emotion are inevitably connected. The paper will explore how the interplay between memory and emotion plays an important role in the identity formation of this community of painters. In this process, this article will also explore the relation between myth making and memory. This paper is divided into two sections. The first section is on '**Space, time and authority**', where I have explored how being a migratory community, the Patuas exercise a sense of authority over the space they live today. It will also explore, how do they individually recall their first coming to Naya and how do they define their relationship with the place? In this process of remembrance, what role does sentiment play and how through these acts of recall do they constitute their identity and authority? The second part of the essay '**Lineage, time and identity**', explores the way they have reconstructed their own past through memories, and forged a common identity of being 'Chitrakar'. The emotional attachment they have with a past is very precious to them.

Space, Time and Authority

Through migration, in the period between the 1950s and 1960s, a community of Muslim Patuas came to form a settlement in Naya. While this village is located at the western part of Medinipur, most of the families involved in *pat*-making here come from the eastern part of the region. Before their coming to this village, there was no Patua *para* (settlement). Among the original inhabitants of the place, there were no Patuas or artists' groups. In this section, I will argue how they define their relationship with the place they today live in; and for that, it is necessary to see how they define their first coming.

When did the Patuas come to Naya? This is definitely a difficult question to answer. To explore the answers, I tried to use oral testimonies of the principal families of the villages, as that can throw light on their arrival. The answers refer back their first coming to the years between the 1950s and the 1960s. One of the members of these principal families is Nanigopal, whose father was late Pulin Chitrakar. According to him, his grandfather came to this village in 1949.¹ Ananda, another son of Pulin Chitrakar added: 'With my father (Pulin Chitrakar) his maternal uncle, Ramapada Chitrakar and another Patua, Jyoti Chitrakar, came here. I heard from my father that the year was 1955.'²

Dukhusyam Chitrakar, one of the oldest Patuas of the village, said that he has been living in Naya for at least sixty years. Dukhusyam said: 'I was eight years old when my maternal uncle

¹ Nanigopal/ Tajmohammad Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015. He said: 'My grandfather Bhushan Chitrakar probably came to Naya in 1949, definitely after independence. He was the only one who first came here.'

² Ananda Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2014.

(Gunadhar Chitrakar) brought me here.’³Dukhusyam is now seventy one years old, so he must have come to Naya around 1952. Shyamsundar, another relative of Dukhusyam, told me: ‘I came to Naya fifty years ago...I am a very old settler of the place’.⁴ Meena Chitrakar, who belongs to one of the oldest Patua families of Naya said: ‘When I was fifteen years old, I came to Naya. My husband (Amar Chitrakar) was then fifty five years of age.’⁵

Their testimonies confirm the fact that they believe, they are the pioneers who showed the migratory path to others. They always try to prove through their memory, how they are the ones who first came here and that automatically gives them the opportunity to have authentic knowledge of this place. Knowledge means the history of the place and through which they can assert their command over it. Their authentic knowledge of the place also gives them a sense of authority over the place.

These first-generation immigrants have a sense of authority on their testimonies by saying that he or she first came here. In a way it is the authority of being ‘the originals’. When Dukhusyam says ‘*ami adi*’, it means he is ‘the original’.⁶ Not only Dukhusyam but others also claim the same. However, it is not by saying that he was born here but rather saying that he came before others. The same is applicable to Nanigopal and Ananda; both claim that they are the descendants of the first settlers.⁷ This kind of claim reflects a certain state of mind of an interviewee.

³ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2014.

⁴ Shyamsundar Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015.

⁵ Meena Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015.

⁶ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, March, 2015.

⁷ Nanigopal Chitrakar and Ananda Chitrakar, March, 2015.

Some among them also were denying their past by claiming to be ‘the originals’, for instance, Gurupada and Montu, whose memories are second-hand memory, as they themselves did not take part in the migration. They are of the opinion that their father is a local (later Gurupada accepted that his father was not originally from Naya) and that gives him the scope of being aboriginal.⁸ Swarna Chitrakar, a female Patua of the village, also thinks that her father is a local, so her right over this place has been established much before others.⁹ In reality, though, both of their fathers (respectively Goffur Chitrakar and Amar Chitrakar) are not originally from Naya.

The statements of the Chitrakars may appear somewhat ambiguous to those keen on specificity. They clearly do not have strong notions of particular dates. Their notion of time is approximate. But, is that not useful to us as historians? Clearly, yes. Here one needs to focus on how through their remembrance they relate to the space they live in. The Patuas may have come to this place for different personal reasons, but they do not have any nostalgia for their previous home. It was very important for them to have a home. So their feelings are not exactly similar to that of other migrants. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay ‘Remembered village’, has discussed how the memory of being a refugee in the aftermath of Bengal partition created both a sense of nostalgia and trauma.¹⁰

⁸ Gurupada Chitrakar and Montu Chitrakar, March, 2015.

⁹ Swarna Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 31:32 (Aug 10, 1998): 2143-2145+2147-2151.

In Naya, we see no evidence of such nostalgia or trauma. According to the Patuas of Naya, they have benefitted from coming to this place. This is the only home many would like to recognize. The Patuas have come to this village in the hope of good life, leaving behind the conditions of acute distress; their love for this village is more than what they have for their original home. For instance Hazra Chitrakar, a woman Patua of Naya, said, ‘I remember in Thekuya Chak I used to beg. I did not have food to feed my children. I still remember the *thela* (hand cart) we used to travel in. After coming to Naya our life changed. I got a job as a painter. Naya has given us a house to stay. For me this is my home and they (other Patuas of the village) are my family.’¹¹ Thus, when asked, they preferred to identify with the land they today live in.

Lineage, Time and Identity

This section will be on the collective or shared memory of the Patuas of Naya and how they all related themselves to a particular ancient community, also known as the Chitrakars. The word ‘collective memory’ is first used by Maurice Halbwachs,¹² which means a memory that is shared by the whole community. It is made up of more than one personal memory. Through their collective memory, the Patuas are tracing their origin and lineage to an ancient time.

The three key notes of this section are lineage, time and identity. These Patuas have a tendency to glorify their past, which appears obvious from the conversations I had with them. Their connection to this mythical identity is part of their memory. They are indebted to their past and

¹¹ Hazra Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015.

¹² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

are trying to use an ancient time to establish a proper identity for themselves. In this section, my intention is to look into the reconstruction of their identity as a ‘Chitrakar’ community.

When I asked them individually, why they use the surname Chitrakar and not any other surname like Patua or Chabri, which are used in other regions of Medinipur¹³, the common answer was that it is their ancestral name. Yakub Chitrakar told me that it is unique to Medinipur’s Patuas. He said that they call themselves Chitrakar from ancient times onwards. However, people generally call them Patuas. He said, ‘In Naya, everybody uses the surname Chitrakar. In different regions the Patuas have different names. Here it is Chitrakar but if you go to Murshidabad or Birbhum you will find they use surnames like Chabri or Patua or Poto.’¹⁴ According to Shyamsundar it is their *padabi* (surname).¹⁵ In fact, their visiting cards have ‘Chitrakar’ after their names. There are also Patuas like Dukhusyam who thinks that it does not matter whether they use ‘Chitrakar’ or ‘Patua’ they would always remain an artists’ group which is operating for centuries. He said, ‘Chitrakar means to draw (*chitra*= painting, *kar*= do). It is an ancient community.’¹⁶

Identity is ascribed and constructed or imagined. In this case, to some extent the Patuas have constructed their identities. It is fascinating to see, how a self-admitted Muslim group is appropriating a surname, which has its root much before the coming of Islam to India.¹⁷ When I

¹³ Binoy Bhattacharya, *Cultural Oscillation: a Study on Patua Culture* (Calcutta; Naya Prakash, 1980).

¹⁴ Yakub Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2013.

¹⁵ Shyamsundar Chitrakar, March, 2013.

¹⁶ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, October, 2014.

¹⁷ There are references to the Chitrakar community in ancient Hindu texts. For example, the tenth section of ‘Brahmakhanda’ of *Brahmavaivarta Purana* has mentioned that the Chitrakars are the descendants of a Brahmin father and Gope mother. They belong to the Nabasakh caste. For details see Bhattacharya, *Cultural Oscillation*.

asked the Patuas why they use the word Chitrakar instead of Patua, they largely indicated that they are the descendants from the Chitrakar community. Thus, they use the title ‘Chitrakar’, whereby they are constructing their own antiquity. They are seen as the bearers of a disappearing tradition. They call it their *aitijhya*, which can be interpreted as cultural heritage. They have the notion that their ancient association with the Chitrakar community is their asset, and they make good use of it in the global commercial market. Antiquity can be marketed.

Without knowing the nature of Chitrakars, one cannot be sure of their politics. I have tried to investigate whether this community is a closed community or not. If this is a closed community, then its self-identity would become more definite. I do not find the accounts to be very coherent. Some of them are defining it as a closed community and others are totally denying it. In my conversation with Nanigopal Chitrakar, I came to know that no other community could become Chitrakar.¹⁸ So there is a tendency to seal this art to a particular community. However Dukhusyam told me, ‘Any one can become Chitrakar by changing their surname. I remember many years ago some of the Patuas used to use Chabri and other surnames but now they are also Chitrakar.’¹⁹ More interestingly it is not necessary that a female becomes a Chitrakar by marrying a male Chitrakar. Moyna, a female Patua told me that she trained her husband Malek in scroll painting and he became a Chitrakar.²⁰

¹⁸ Nanigopal Chitrakar, March, 2015. He used particularly this sentence- ‘*amra chara anyo keu chitrakar hote pare na. Aar ei patachitra yug yug dhore amader purbopurushrai kore asche.*’

¹⁹ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, April, 2013.

²⁰ Moyna Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, April, 2013. She said, ‘My in-laws are not scroll painters. In Nandigram they used to do some other business, but that was not enough for our livelihood. So I taught him the art and now he also became a Chitrakar.’

I asked individual Patuas, from when are they using the surname ‘Chitrakar’? Dukhusyam told me, ‘In my family people have been using it for centuries. But as I have told you they also called themselves Patua. Actually we are from Kalighat (a place in present Day Calcutta), where every painter is known as Patua.’²¹ Shyamsundar reacted strongly and said, ‘It is from ancient times my ancestors also used this surname (*Amar baap-kakar amal theke chole asche*)’²². The word *amal* means era and for them it is infinite. Ananda said, ‘It is timeless. It is difficult to tell the exact time period.’²³ In reality, many of the Patuas are first generation scroll painters.²⁴ Some of the Chitrakars also came from mat-making families.²⁵

Previous studies show that along with the Chitrakars, the Achryas and Sutradhars were also involved with *patachitra*. This raises the question, why do only the Patuas adopt the surname Chitrakar? Dukhusyam’s father Amulya was an idol maker in Kalighat: why did he specifically choose Chitrakar? Dukhusyam told me, ‘There are many people in the village, who

²¹ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, March, 2015.

²² Shyamsundar Chitrakar, November, 2014.

²³ Ananda Chitrakar, March, 2015.

²⁴ Meena Chitrakar said, ‘In my maternal home I used to make dolls. I learnt this art only after marriage.’ Meena Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015. Although Shyamsundar said his family was using this surname from the ancient time his wife, Rani said, ‘In my husband’s ancestral home there was no culture of *pat*.’ Rani Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, West Medinipur, March, 2015. Guljan Chitrakar said in an interview, ‘I was born in a family of four brothers and two sisters. My mother sold women’s wares in the village, and my father showed scrolls in order to bring enough rice home to feed us. All my brothers earned money by driving bicycle taxis. My elder sister got married in this neighborhood and learned the art and songs from Rani.’ Guljan Chitrakar, Life histories, Singing painters of Naya, Wesleyan University, 2006, Date accessed on March 15, 2015, <http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/naya/artists/gulja.html>

²⁵ See the testimony of Jaba Chitrakar in Learning Objects a Wesleyan University project, Date accessed on March 15, 2015, <http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/naya/artists/jaba.html>

just took the surname without knowing the art. Actually, there are some benefits of being a Chitrakar. I think you have heard of the OBC rights. Chitrakars belong to the OBC category'.²⁶ It was in the late twentieth century that state had recognized them as Other Backward Class.²⁷ Therefore, the question is, do they use 'Chitrakar' just to avail the OBC rights?

These people add timelessness to their Chitrakar identity by evoking myths. Stories of this kind constitute a form of "myth-making", through which they establish a lineage. These mythical stories are a very important part of their memory. I have explored these myths here, in brief, to understand their narrative strategies.

The stories trace back to the origin of the world. This strategically omits the need to identify a specific date of origin due to the timelessness of the myths. For instance, Jamal Chitrakar said: 'Chitrakar is an ancient community. Its history is located in an ancient time. It goes back to many years ago...actually it has no particular time period. My ancestors were practicing this art for centuries and that is why the word simply means Chitrakar, who can paint. As far as I remember, everyone in our family was a Chitrakar.'²⁸

Frank Korom, a folklorist who worked on Naya, also mentioned some of the mythical stories narrated by the Patuas, which confirmed their tendency to emphasize upon antiquity. Korom writes about Gurupada Chitrakar's story. Gurupada narrates the origin of the Patuas.

²⁶ Dukhusyam Chitrakar, March, 2015.

²⁷ See, West Bengal Commission For Backward Classes, Report Number V, <http://wbcbcc.gov.in/advice/5th-rpt.pdf>; also The list of Other Backward Classes, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Date accessed on November 20,2014, http://www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/htm/obc_list.html ;<https://www.paschimmedinipur.gov.in/collectorate/scst/OBC%20LIST%20IN%20WEST%20BENGAL.pdf> ; also see for the *Patidar*, West Bengal Commission For Backward Classes, Report Number VI, 1996, <http://wbcbcc.gov.in/advice/6th-rpt.pdf> See <http://wbcbcc.gov.in/advice/6th-rpt.pdf>

²⁸ Jamal Chitrakar, March, 2014.

According to him about two-and-a half to three thousand years ago there was a monster, who used to live in a big cave near a village in Bengal. In twilight he used to come out of his cave to kill and eat the villagers.

A wise man thought of a plan to stop the carnage of this man-eater. So he made a mirror and kept it in the demon's cave. After looking at his own reflection, the demon became so confused that he killed himself in impulse. Then the villagers breathed a sigh of relief and could sleep peacefully at night. In the morning they thought to convey the good news to others also. They decided to go door to door to disseminate the state of affair. Then a clever villager said that in exchange of the good news they should charge fees.²⁹Gurupada further added, 'Then on a canvas they drew the event and prepared a verbal narration of the drawing and showed it to the villagers and through this act, birth of a new profession took place. In this way, after having gone to every house time after time bringing the news, they realized that they should do something new. So gradually they began to draw something new from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata...'³⁰ Rani, the elder sister of Gurupada also told a similar narrative.³¹ In both the stories, the demon

²⁹ Frank J. Korom, *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Museum of International Folk Art, 2007): 37-38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Pika Ghosh, "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late –Nineteenth- Century Bengal", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62:3 (Aug., 2003): 835. Ghosh recorded this story in 1995 at Poush Mela, Rani Chitrakar's testimonies:

Two and a half thousand years ago, long before Lakshman Sena ruled Bengal, there was a monster who used to come out of its cave every night and eat people. The people could not kill him because they feared him very much. They finally put a plan together and made a mirror. When the monster came out that night and saw his reflection, he was so startled to see another creature as big and powerful as himself that he lashed out at the mirror, shattering the glass. But, each broken piece reflected himself back at him. As he turned, these creatures seemed to surround him. He felt they had multiplied. So in his fear and rage, he hit his head and wept and led himself to death. The people came back the next morning and saw the splintered glass and the dead monster. Now, how to tell all the other villages the news that they could live without fear? So, the same man who had come up with the scheme to kill the monster was asked to devise a second

acted similarly. If we read carefully, it is clear that both the stories talk about a kind of moral responsibility of the Patuas.

Like Jamal Chitrakar's testimony, Gurupada and Rani's stories also record an infinitely long period. In Gurupada's account, he mentioned the time as about two-and-a half to three thousand years ago³². Rani specifically mentioned the Patuas as living much before the era of Lakshmana Sen of Bengal. Lakshmana Sen is a historical figure, so Rani might be using Lakshmana Sen's time (the twelfth century) to suggest the antiquity of the story.

Other sorts of the accounts hold that the Chitrakars had their roots in a primitive age, when people were unable to speak and they used painting as a means of communication. It was much before human beings became civilized. Ananda Chitrakar says that the people first communicate with each other through cave paintings. In his opinion Chitrakars are the predecessors of these cave painters. The word Chitrakar simply means 'a person who paints'.³³ To Nanigopal Chitrakar, brother of Ananda, the birth of the Chitrakars and their art, like any other folk art, has no definitive time period. As if, it is natural, created directly by God, it could not be questioned.³⁴ He also refers to the cave painters. However he goes further back to the Eve

plan. A big leaf was used to paint the picture of the monster. This image was circulated from village to village, and the man was packed off to tell the story. Wherever he told the tale, they gave him rice and, of course, food to eat. Soon it transformed his livelihood. He no longer cultivated land. Then they wanted new stories, so he went to the Ramayana and Mahabharata and added songs to storytelling and pictures on cloth.

³² Korom, *Village of Painters*, 37.

³³ Ananda Chitrakar, March, 2015. According to him, 'If we go back to the beginning of the world, there were people who did not know how to speak. So what did they do? They used to draw on cave walls with the blood of animals to communicate with each other. Some of them realized that they need to teach others about right and wrong, and they did that with the help of those paintings. That is how we got cave paintings. So, if I am asked where the chitrakars came from, I will say that, this is how the birth of chitrakars took place. It means a person who paints.'

³⁴ Nanigopal Chitrakar, March, 2015.

and Adam story. He puts it this way, ‘...the birth of two humans *Adom* (Adam) and *Hoba* (Eve). They were created directly by the creator, the God (*Bhogoban ba allah jai bolo*).’³⁵ After killing the animals and eating their raw meats, Adam and Eve used to paint pictures in the cave with the animal blood.

The Chitrakar community sees itself as coming from a particular past and for them this past has lost its value in today’s world. Maybe the stories or the myths are not similar but collectively they share the common notion of being an ancient community of painters, the Chitrakars. Their construction of that particular golden time has its root in the present time and it is a device to evaluate the present. Binoy Bhattacharya’s study of the Patuas of Birbhum has similar evocation of a golden past.³⁶ It made them a ‘true’ traditional artisan community. Therefore, they are the *bahak* or bearer of this past, which was a golden age.

Conclusion

This essay shows the relationship between emotion and memory, where time has been used as a tool to validate the testimonies. When the Patuas are remembering their first coming individually, they are using the time more or less as a specific object. But in the case of the concept of time reflected in the shared memory, it is infinite. Through individual memory they must prove their own testimonies ‘true’ or more authentic than the other, for the benefit of the self. In both the cases, it is the emotional aspect of the testimonies that plays an important part. Their social and economical standing makes them vulnerable to emotion. They themselves are quite aware of the fact that Naya is not their original home, but to the outer world they have to

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Bhattacharya, *Cultural Oscillation*.

prove their originality. The same is in the case of the identification of the Chitrakar community. In the age of commercialization they must sell their identity in the art market and that requires a certain kind of emotional attachment to the past. When they say that they have a golden past, it automatically shows their sentiments toward their identification as an ancient community of painters.

In an essay on oral history, Paul Thompson explores the problem of the reliability of memory. He points out that there is always a chance that ‘social need and interest’ can affect memory.³⁷ The Patuas want to raise the market value of their art, by glorifying their identity. There was a time when this art had lost its value due to competitive technological advancement. My interviewees repeatedly narrate how in earlier times, people used to gather to watch the way Patuas sang while displaying scrolls. In exchange, they received gifts in kind or cash. However, some believe that the coming of modern media diminished their importance as performers and entertainers. Shyamsundar, a Patua lamented, ‘Our ancestors used to be considered artists and entertainers once, but since the coming of TV and radio, people got their entertainment within the confines of four walls. So they lost interest in the person with a *patachitra* in distant villages.’³⁸

In oral history, it is of utmost importance to find the meaning of the answer rather than treating them in face value. When we are doing an oral history of a community, it is necessary to see how the individual memory interacts with the collective memory.

³⁷ Thompson, ‘Problems of Method in Oral History’, *Oral History* 1:4, The Interview in Social History: Part 1 (1972), 1-47, 7.

³⁸ Shyamsundar Chitrakar, March 2014.

In this essay, I have also tried to show how individual memories of being a migrant are linked with the shared memory of being Chitrakars. In this case, both individual and collective memories express two different natures of the mindset. Different sentiments are fused with each other. The emotions of individuals are collectively creating a scope for a communal sentiment, which sheds light on how individual histories are interlinked with the history of a community.

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Oral interviews were collected from the village Naya located in the western part of Medinipur district of West Bengal, India over the years from March 2013 to March 2015. Some interviews were collected from the online archive created by the Wesleyan University under the project name Learning Objects.

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