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Cultural and Religious Tourism in Majuli With Special Reference to Auniati Sattra And Uttar Kamalabari Sattra

Gitanjali Goswami¹, Mousumi Sharma²

bhabisuta@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper attempts to study the potential of cultural and religious tourism industry in Majuli as a whole and Auniati Sattra and Uttar Kamalabari Sattra of the island in particular. The scope of tourism in Majuli, be it eco-tourism or religious tourism and cultural tourism is tremendous with nature's opulence in full display here. Majuli, renowned as one of the world's largest freshwater river island is a conglomeration of Vaishnavite religion, natural beauty, art and craft, ethnic culture and traditions which needs to be explored and showcased to the world. The Sattras (Vaishnava monasteries) and their rich heritage and cultures have given Majuli the status and pride of being the "Cultural Capital of Assam". Today people have shifted from the traditional ways of touring in the form of going to hill stations, historical places etc. to more adventurous and unexplored destinations. Adding to the other attractions of northeast India, Majuli stands out as a jewel in the crown with its total package of natural beauty, religious monasteries, eco-tourism etc. An attempt has been made to present the uniqueness of Majuli's Sattras, its different congregational prayer services, a distinct dance form called Sattriya and an about to be an extinct art form mask making as a potential tool to put Majuli in the tourist map of India and the world.

Keywords: Bhakat, Bhaona, Shrimanta Sankaradeva, Sattra, Sattriya

Introduction

The north eastern part of India is known as the treasure trove of nature's divine beauty. It is bestowed with picturesque landscapes, crystalline waterfalls, undulating hills, green valleys, blue lakes, dense forests and rich culture. The serene ambience of this part of the country has long been a traveller's paradise. With colourful costumes, traditional villages, an amazing array of flora and fauna, mighty rivers, great cultural diversity it has the potential to do wonders in the tourism sector. Assam is the gateway to the entire North East and is a true representation of the same. It is a meeting place of diverse cultures. Its breathtaking landscapes, lush green tea gardens, pilgrim centres, carefully preserved history and untouched aura allures the visitors. The prominent among the tourist places in Assam are Kaziranga and Manas National Parks, both of which are UNESCO world heritage sites, Kamakhya temple, Vaishnavite monasteries in Majuli, Barpeta etc.

Tourism is traditionally defined or rather perceived as people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment either for leisure, business and other purposes. However, it has been observed that there has been a paradigm shift in the way people want to spend their leisure time. A certain section of the people particularly domestic tourists is getting inclined to adventure tourism or eco-tourism or a mix of adventure, eco and religious visits with the international tourist already in this circuit. In the 'Paradise Unexplored i.e. northeast India, there stands a jewel in the crown which has the potential of catering to what a neo tourist wants today. This riverine island occupies a very important place in the tourist map of India and the world as well because it is the embodiment of natural beauty, ethnic composition and the unique *Vaishnavite* religion and cultures all assemblage together in a beautiful way under the sky.

The Sattras are the centres of Assamese culture with their traditional prayer form, a 566 years old tradition of open-theatrical custom, classical dances and handicrafts. The very nature of the topic suggests that there is a great scope to investigate and

conduct a detailed study on cultural and Religious Tourism in Majuli with special Reference to Auniati and Uttar Kamalabari Sattra.

Review of literature

For the presentation of this paper, a number of secondary sources in the form of books, journals, periodicals, articles, English and vernacular magazines have been consulted.

Edward Gait(1962) provides a comprehensive account of the history of the region and can be said to be an authority on the same. The evolution of Shrimanta Sankaradeva's movement has also been covered by his book that provides relevant information about the course of its development. Neog(1963) has thrown light on the essence and philosophy of *Eka-saran –Naam- Dharma* or *Neo –Vaishnavism* initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva. He has also dealt with the various works of Srimanta Sankardeva and his direct disciple, Madhavdeva. Barua (1965) treats in details the cultural contribution of Shrimanta Sankardeva ranging from the plays (*Ankiya Nat or Bhaonas*), their various forms, timings to the poems, songs and verses composed by the Saint (*Bargeet, Kirttan-ghosa* etc). Neog (1967) has traced the background of the *movement* at the very outset of his work. Subsequently, he goes on to discuss Srimanta Sankardeva's *Neo-Vaishnavite* order, the tenets and practices of the faith and his attempts at social reorganization significantly, in the chapter titled *An Anthology Of Songs and Verses*. In the fourth stanza of one of his poems, the readers can get an insight into Srimanta Sankardeva's concern for all living creatures. The dance form of *oja-pali* of Assam was studied by Goswami (1997), who has described the dance gestures and the musical modes attached to it. It is intended to give to the readers some glimpses of the multi-faceted genius and personality of Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his long-lasting contributions practically in all fields of life and literature, art and culture. Neog (2004) has discussed about the Assamese culture with particular reference to *Vaishnava* renaissance, the *Bhakti* cycle of Assam, *Vaishnava* music and the Indian Ballet. Barkakoti's work (2006) is a comprehensive one dealing with diverse themes ranging

from the life sketch of Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his philosophy to *ankiya nats* (one-act devotional plays) and *bhaonas* (a dramatic show of *Vaishnavite* dramas; a religious performance) of the Saint. He gives the readers an insight into how Shrimanta Sankaradeva through his *Neo-Vaishnavite* creed brought the composite Assamese nation into being. The treatise breaks new ground in bringing to light the sociological import of the cultural processing that *Vaishnava* movement has set in motion over the Centuries.

Methodology

The data for the present study which is exploratory in nature was collected at two levels: -

- (i) The first step was the collection of secondary data related to the topic through intensive library work.
- (ii) The second step was information collected through field work conducted in various phases.

As a first step of creating the universe of the study, relevant information was collected from various sources like books, reports, research journals, newspapers etc. and also from the various institutions and libraries. The facts and qualitative and analytical data presented in this study have been collected from numerous visits to Auniati Sattrra and Uttar Kamalabari Sattrra of Majuli. Personal meetings, one to one interaction, structured as well as unstructured interviews with the inmates of both the Sattrras and observation method were employed to collect data.

Statement of the problem

This study is devoted towards understanding the potential of religious and eco-tourism in Majuli River Island with special reference to Auniati Sattrra and Uttar Kamalabari Sattrra. This River Island is considered as the cradle of *Vaishnavite* culture due to its unadulterated culture and spirituality and this uniqueness needs to be showcased to the world.

Natural beauty: Cut off from the mainland, the pollution-free and peaceful atmosphere of the island provides a welcome respite from the tiring, strident and monotonous existence of city life. The river banks and sandbars (*chars*) present an alluring picture with the blooming white reeds (*kohua*) moving relentlessly to and fro. Isolation from the mainland has helped in the protection and preservation of some of the rare species of flora and fauna. It is at its best in winter as innumerable migratory birds flock to the island during this season because of which it has been declared as one of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) of India. The sunset in the heart of the Brahmaputra is always a tourist's delight. On the floral side, Majuli has more than a thousand species of trees, grasses, creepers, flowers, orchids ferns and other forms of plants. Sufficient rains and humidity endow Majuli with evergreen and deciduous forests. Some of the prominent bird watching sites are Saluki *beel* (a lake-like wetland with static water) Dowkpara, Borbilla, Duboritoli and Rambolia. All these have made Majuli one of the most sought tourist destinations.

Ethnic composition: Majuli is the homeland of multiple ethnic tribes -the Mishings, Deuris, Sonowal Kacharis and Matakis. Traditional cottage industries like cane and bamboo, pottery, mask making, boat-making, mat-making, handloom and weaving is not only a source of income but a living tradition guarded jealously by the people. The Kumar community of Salmara, a small village in Majuli, is famous for its pottery products. Silk, *endi* and cotton fabrics of Majuli are in great demand all over the State. *Ribigachang* (a hand-woven shawl worn by women), *Mibugaluk* (a traditional shirt worn by men), *Mirizim* (a type of hand-woven cotton blanket), silk and cotton dresses woven by Mishing women are in demand in the international market. Women of the Nath community are also expert in weaving *pat* (the silk of the mulberry fed silkworm) and *muga* (amber colour silk produced from a muga cocoon) clothes. *Bishu*, a colourful spring festival and *Hurairangali*, a dance form of the Deuri tribe, the spring festival of the Sonowal Kacharis, the *Bathou Puja* and *Haidang Hagra*, *Bohua* the main dance forms of this community can leave a tourist spellbound. Ali-ye-ligang, the harvest festival of the Mishings can also charm a visitor.

The Vaishnavite religion and culture: Shrimanta Sankaradeva, a 16th Century religious preacher, social reformer, poet, musician and dramatist brought about a cultural renaissance in Assam through an institution known as Sattrā (*Vaishnavite* monastery) which provided the venue and atmosphere for religious, social and artistic activities. This institution not only served as the vehicle for propagating *Vaishnavite* faith and religion but also helped in making the society free from blind religious dogmas, superstitions and ritualistic processes. After Shrimanta Sankaradeva, the faith was propagated by his two chief apostles Sri Madhavadeva and Sri Damodaradeva.

64 Sattras were established in the 16th and 17th century, of which only 22 remains at present. The rest have either been eroded away or had to be shifted to other places. Majuli is regarded as the nerve centre of *Neo-Vaishnavite* religion, art and culture. The Sattras and their influence in the religious, cultural and social life of the people have made Majuli the principal seat of pilgrimage for all people in general and the *Vaishnavites* (followers of *Vishnu*, who has a thousand Names) in particular.

The following are some of the prominent Sattras of Majuli- Auniati *Sattrā*, Uttar Kamalabari *Sattrā*, Dakhinpat *Sattrā*, Natun Kamalabari *Sattrā*, Garmur *Sattrā*, Natun Samuguri *Sattrā*, and Bengenaati *Sattrā*. Of these, the Auniati *Sattrā* and Uttar Kamalabari need special mention.

Tourists throng Auniati *Sattrā* and Uttar Kamalabari as these two Sattras are the treasure house of various dance forms, drama, music, arts and crafts and preserve antiques like weapons, utensils, jewellery and other items of cultural significance.

Auniati Sattrā: The Auniati *Sattrā* was patronized by the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Sinha and founded by Niranjana Dev. This *Sattrā* has been the epicentre of Vaishnavism and Sattriya culture of Assam. The museum of the *Sattrā* has an enviable collection of historical relics including old Assamese utensils, jewellery, handicraft and ivory works. Apart from the daily holy religious practices, the *Sattrā* also pursues various literary activities, dance forms, songs and music, drama etc. In addition, various religious activities devoted to the Lord Vishnu are performed in the form of

festivals. Some of them like the *Paalnaam*, *Kati Bihu*, *Rasotsava*, *Holi*, *Janmastami* are worth mentioning. Among others, the death anniversary of Shrimanta Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva are widely celebrated. The special occasions which attract tourist to this Sattra are-

- i. ***Palnaam***: It is a five-day festival beginning on the 25th day of the Assamese month of *Kartika*. (a very important month in the Hindu calendar from mid-October to mid-November). Thousands of people come every year to witness this event. At this time there is a ritual to offer “Salt” to the Lord as there is a belief that the donation of ‘Salt’ is equivalent to the donation of ‘Gold’.



Figure 1: His holiness Sattradhikar with other Bhakats in Palnam



Figure 2: The bhakat (inmate) lighting the earthen lamps (Akash Banti)

- ii. ***Kati Bihu***: In the month of *Kartika* a traditional lamp lighting ceremony is observed in the Auniati Sattra. This tradition is being followed scrupulously every year since its inception in the year 1653 AD. The *bhakats* (inmates) light the earthen lamps (*akash bonti*) for peace, happiness and prosperity of mankind and to seek the Almighty’s blessings on the eve of the auspicious month of *Kartika*. Altogether 21 pairs of earthen lamps are lit which is a sight to behold.
- iii. ***Rasotsava***: In the festival of *Rasotsava* a special puja is performed in a *mandapa* (altar) erected inside the *namghar* (‘Nam’ consists of the meaning of prayer to Hindu’s supreme God Vishnu and ‘Ghar’ consist of the meaning of the house (where prayer is done) instead of the *manikuta*(is an independent

room located towards the eastern end of Namghar. It is the place that represents the worshipful god, or a guru-asana (the guru's seat). Here the idols of Radha Krishna are installed and worshipped. During this festival, various dance dances, drama and *bhaona*'s (is a traditional form of entertainment, with religious messages, prevalent in Assam, India.) is performed.

- iv. ***Sachipat* manuscripts:** In Auniati Sattrā a lot of age-old manuscripts written in *Sachipat* can be found. *Sachi* is the writing material prepared from the bark of *Sachi* (*Aquilaria agallocha*) tree.
- v. **Handicrafts:** Of the different types of handicrafts, hand fans find a prominent place. In the making of the hand fans a special ingredient known as *hengul haitaal* (yellow arsenic (*haital*), vermillion (*hengul*) is used which give long life and colour to the hand fans.
- vi. **Museum:** The premises of Auniati Sattrā also boast of a very informative and well-maintained museum. It has preserved varied artefacts of common use, tools, weapons, statues, decorative ornaments etc for centuries. These articles throw considerable light on the rich cultural heritage of Majuli.



Figure 3: Ancient Articles preserved at the Auniati Sattrā Museum (Bhringar, Guwa Bota, Joy Ghanta, Pitalar Gorur)

The table below shows the number of domestic tourist visits (DTV) and foreign tourist visits (FTV) to Auniati Sattrra Museum and the revenue collected from there.

Year	Visitors to Museum in AuniatiSattrra		Collection from visitors (in Rs)		General visitors to AuniatiSattrra.
	DTVs	FTVs	DTVs	FTVs	
2010	7,320	360	36,600	18,000	21,000
2011	8,275	415	41,375	20,750	27,000
2012	9,140	450	45,700	22,500	30,000
2013	9,000	520	45,000	26,000	24,000
2014	9,470	318	94,700	15,900	28,000
2015	10,025	430	100,250	21,500	35,000
2016	11,000	310	110,000	15,500	44,000
2017	12,130	470	121,300	23,500	55,000
2018	10,420	510	104,200	25,500	47,000
2019	11,390	440	113,900	22,000	38,000
2020	600	15	6,000	750	15,000

Table 1: During Pal Naam, the number of tourists visiting Majuli exceeds one lakh



Figure 4: Overseas visitors visiting the Auniati Sattrra

Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā: It is one of the most culturally developed Sattras of Assam. The rosary used by Shrimanta Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva, footprints of Madhavadeva engraved on stones and manuscripts such as *Nammallika Ratnawali* written by Madhavadeva and *Dasama* authored by Shrimanta Sankaradeva are preserved in this *Sattrā*. Both Uttar Kamalabari *Sattrā* and Natun Kamalabari *Sattrā* impart training in Sattriya dance and music.

The primary attractions of this Sattrā are:

- i. **Uttar Kamalabari Kristi Kendra:** It is a cultural centre established in 1955 so that the inmates of the Sattrā gets enough opportunity to show their talents in both the national and international arena. It is through their performance the *Vaishnavite* culture and tradition of the Sattrā gets national and international recognition. It is run by a Cultural Committee which is formed through a formally elected body elected after a period of every three years.

- ii. **Performing Arts:** The senior *bhakats* expertise in different fields of dance and music imparts training to the novices. Songs composed by the two Saints Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are taught those that are sung and practised in the Sattrā. Among them, the most popular is the *Bargeets* (Songs of Higher Praise) or prayer songs sung during various services of the Sattrā. “*Bargeet* is a convergence of philosophical reflections, secular and ethical broodings, agonies of the spirit, and saintly humility. Each *Bargeet* invariably concludes with a passionate cry for refuge at the feet of Lord Govinda and deliverance from the sufferings of the world (Phukan,2010:110)”. The other types of songs are the ones that are used in the presentation of the drama, also known as *ankar geet*. *Oja-pali* is another form of dance music that is also taught to the junior *bhakats* .It consists of a band of singers with a leader called *Oja* and his supporters called *pali*. *Gayan-bayan*, a kind of dance-cum-choral music performed in groups is also taught. The young *bhakats* are also trained

to play the different percussion instruments like *khol*, *mridanga* and various types of *tal*(cymbals).



Figure 5: Getting ready for Bhaona

With a number of *hasta mudras* (hand postures), intricate choreographic patterns, distinctive costumes and use of masks, Sattriya dance is unique in itself. The various forms of dances that are taught in the Sattria are *sutradhar anach*, *gosai prabeswar nach*, *gopi prabeswarnach*, *chali nach*, *behar nritya*, *jhumura*, *dasaavatar*, *mati-akhara* and *nadu- bhangi*. Besides, the young inmates are also taught the techniques of performance of *ankiyanat* or *bhaona* presentation

- a. The *Sutradhar* or the narrator plays the principal role in the presentation of *ankiya nat* (one-act play). His part is pivotal in the

dramatic performance as he strings together all the components, right from introducing the theme, announcing the entrance and exit of the character, explaining the different situations and then leading the benedictory singing. This dance requires not only the ability to sing and dance but also a clear understanding of the entire play.

- b. *Gosai praveswar nach* is also known as *Krishna bhangi*; it signifies the entrance of Lord Krishna to the stage with dancing movements. The *gopi praveswar nach* introduces the entrance of *gopis* (Lord Krishna's beloveds) to the stage, characterized by soft and feminine dance movements.
- c. The *chali* dance is performed by young *bhakats* wearing female costumes representing the *gopis* while in *behar nritya* the dancing boys numbering 25-30 dress like Lord Krishna. The *jhumura nritya* (*nritya* means dance) is based on a variety of Assamese medieval plays, written and introduced by Madhavadeva. This distinctive form of dance is divided into two parts- *ramdani* and *ga-nach*. *Ramdani* or the preliminary dance is performed before the song begins and the main part or *ga-nach* is performed along with the song and it is believed that this dance stands for the sentiments and physical condition of the *gopis* when Lord Krishna disappeared from their midst. Songs for this dance form is taken from the *nats* and *jhumuras* of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu namely, *Matsya* (Fish), *Kurma* (Tortoise), *Varaha* (Boar), *Narasimha* (the Man-lion), *Vamana* (Dwarf), *Parashurama*, Lord Rama, Balarama, Lord Krishna, *Kalki* is depicted through the *dasaavatar* dance.
- d. Regarded as the basic science of *Sattriya* dance, *mati-akhara* means ground exercise. There are 73 types of *mati-akhoras*, however, 64

are accepted and accordingly appropriate training are imparted. These ground exercises acrobatic and are of two types:(i)pure exercise and (ii)basic dance units. After prolonged and rigorous practice of these ground exercises, the body becomes flexible and helps the trainee dancers to learn the dance techniques easily. *Nadubhangi* is the dance of Lord Krishna with three pairs of *gopas* (*gopa*- a cowherd) and *gopis* (daughter of a cowherd) in Vrindavan. The costumes of all three pairs are different. One pair wears the costume of Lord Krishna; the other two pairs wear the costume of *jhumura nritya* & *chali nach*. The costume of Krishna consists of a yellow-coloured *dhuti*, a small black coat with quarter sleeves (*bukuchula*), silver laced cross-bands and waist bands. Besides these, a head gear (*mukut*) with a peacock feather, a garland of flower (*angamala*) and *nupur* (anklet) are also worn by the performer.



Figure 6: *Behar Nritya*



Figure 7: Raas Nritya

Some domestic as well as international tourists, when they visit the Sattrra express their desire to see the *bhakats* perform the different *Sattriya* dances or *Ankiya bhaona* (The Assamese Vaisnava dramatic tradition established by Saint Sankardeva). The *bhakats* make arrangements for such performances, for which the visitors are required to pay the following amount as given in the table below.

Fees to be paid at the time of Video recording

Sl.No	Particulars	Artist Fare	Kristi Sangha Dev.Fund	Kirttan Ghar Dev.Fund	Ashirbadia	Total
1.	<i>Gayan Bayan</i>	Rs.2500	Rs.1000	Rs.1000	Rs.500	Rs.5000
2.	<i>Ankiya Bhaona</i>	Rs.3500	Rs.1000	Rs.1000	Rs.500	Rs.6000
3.	<i>Behar Nritya</i>	Rs.2500	Rs.1000	Rs.1000	Rs.500	Rs.5000
4.	<i>Jhumura Nritya</i>	Rs.1500	Rs.500	Rs.500	Rs.300	Rs.2800

5.	<i>Chali Nriya</i>	Rs.1500	Rs.500	Rs.500	Rs.300	Rs.2800
6.	<i>Nadubhangi Nriya</i>	Rs.1500	Rs.500	Rs.500	Rs.300	Rs.2800
7.	<i>Mati-Akhora</i>	Rs.1500	Rs.500	Rs.500	Rs.300	Rs.2800
8.	<i>Krishna Leela</i>	Rs.4000	Rs.1000	Rs.1000	Rs.500	Rs.6500



Figure 8: Overseas Visitors from Europe



Figure 9: Overseas Visitors from Japan

It is worth mentioning that the inmates of the Sattrā have also been invited overseas in 2008, 2010 and 2012 to participate in the following festivals.

Name of the festival	Place	Year
Festival Les Orientales,	Saint Florent Le Vieil , France	02 to 06 July,2008
Le Festival d'Evora	Evora , Portugal	07 to 10 July, 2008
Le Festival de Musiques Sacree de l'Abbaye de Sylvanes	Sylvanes, France	11 to 14 July, 2008
Festival Autres Rivages	Uzes, France	15 to 16 July 2008

Le Festival International de Folklore	Issoire, France	17 to 20 July , 2008
Le Festival Interfolk	Puy en Velay, France	21 to 27 July , 2008
Muse du quai Branly	Paris	10 to 13 June 2010
Participated in twenty-two different festivals sponsored by ICCR	France & Switzerland	14 June -15 July 2012

These invitations reflect the enchanting charm of the *Sattriya* culture *at par excellence* and thus bring recognition to the splendid *Sattriya* dance at the international level. This recognition has been possible due to the efforts of prominent French writer Nadine Delpech and others by the name ‘Preserva Majuli’ in Paris to promote *Sattriya* culture.

It is mention-worthy that Ballary and Sojique, two young ladies from France stayed in the *Sattra* guest house for the purpose of learning *Bargeet* in 2009. They initially came as a tourist to *Majuli* and were later fascinated by the cultural and spiritual beauty of the Island. After visiting the *Uttar Kamalabari Sattra*, they decided to stay back and take lessons in music. The researcher would like to mention here that two other ladies, Rebecca and Patricia from France stayed in the *Sattra* for months together and took training in *Sattriya* dance. Rebecca is the first foreigner who took part in the *Rasotsava* festival held in November 2010. A Mumbai based young choreographer from Ghana, South Africa, stayed in the *Sattra* for 15 days and took training in *Sattriya* dance form with special emphasis to *mati-akhara*.



Figure 10: Patricia taking lessons in Sattriya dance



Figure 11: Overseas visitors learning Sattriya dance

iii. Fine Arts- Wood carving and Mask making:

Some of the residential devotees are skilled in the art of wood carving, especially in making the miniature images of deities, thrones or *asanas* and beautifully decorated doors and windows required in the Sattras and for other purposes as well. They are also skillfully specialized in making and preparing the decorative materials, accessories and masks connected with *bhaona*. The elderly *bhakats* train their young counterparts in different techniques associated with these two forms of arts and thus the tradition is handed down from one generation to the other.

Conclusion

It can always be said with conviction that this immense potential place is indeed a visitor's delight and can be one of the most sought-after tourist destinations which will not only boost up the economy of the place but will also contribute to State revenue. However, a lot needs to be done to increase the flow of domestic and foreign tourists to this place. During the annual Raas festival, visitors would have thronged Majuli had there been proper lodging and food facility. Another major hindrance for the tourist is the ferry service, the only means of transportation to the island, which is available only four times a day (twice upstream and twice downstream). So, we would like to request the State and the Central Government to build up the

infrastructure for the inbound tourist in terms of hotels, information centres and transportation facilities.

The fortune and lives of the inhabitants of Majuli are dominated by the river Brahmaputra. Developments through ages are nullified in an instant occurrence of high flood and severe erosion. Erosion and flood in Majuli are two problems which restrict the visits of tourists. So, it is an appeal to the concerned authorities to take urgent steps to curb these two nuisances. The decision to declare Majuli as a World Heritage Site is still to be seen but efforts can be made to save this unique riverine island with all its grandeur and glory.

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