

# Challenges of Fundamentalism in India

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During last few decades, fundamentalist politics is on the rise all over the World, more particularly in West Asian countries and also in South Asia. This is a politics which harps on some selected tenets of religion and tries to impose it on the society. Essentially it is a politics impose values of inequality of pre industrial times in the present times. In India the seeds of fundamentalist politics were sown during colonial period. Freedom movement grew on the values of democracy, secularism and it aimed at Indian Nationalism. In opposition to this rising freedom movement the earlier feudal classes revolved around communal politics, which later assumed the goals of Muslim Nation or Hindu nation, represented in organizations like Muslim League on one side and Hindu Mahasabha-RSS on the other. Today RSS is the major vehicle of fundamentalist politics in India.

The fundamentalist politics manifests itself in India today in acts which are undertaking identity issues like Ram Temple, Holy Cow-Beef, Conversions, Love Jihad, Ghar Wapasi among others. These issues have created Hate and violence against religious minorities particularly Muslims and Christians.

## **RSS: Brief History**

RSS was formed in 1925 in Nagpur. The immediate cause of its formation was the discomfort amongst the upper castes/landlord elements due to the non cooperation movement launched by Gandhi (1920) as a part of freedom movement. This movement brought into fold average people into freedom movement; this caused discomfort to the elite sections of society. At the same time the Non Brahman movement, which took inspiration from Jotiba Phule and Ambedkar, was shaking the social relations of Brahmin landlord on one side and the dalits-workers on the other. The founders of RSS were very inspired by the ideas of nationalism of Hitler. RSS had contempt towards the concept of Indian nationalism, which was the ideology of Nationalism, led by Gandhi. RSS has the goal of Hindu nation and ideology of Hindutva-Hindu Nationalism.

RSS ideology of Hindutva, Hinduness is the concept of Nationalism based on Brahminical values of hierarchy of caste and gender. RSS began with training its volunteers into the version of History, which was communal and had nothing to do with the truth. It said that India has always been a Hindu state and Muslims are aggressors and foreigners. It propounded that Hindu society was free from social ills till the Muslims invaders came. As per RSS concept being promoted by Gandhi-Nehru that India is a land belonging to people of all religions is wrong and that what is needed is to build a Hindu nation and undermine the Muslim nation. It decided to keep aloof from direct electoral politics and went to create a set of volunteer, *swayamsevak*s trained in the ideology of Hindutva. It kept aloof from freedom movement, as freedom movement was based on the values of secularism and democracy, while RSS was

for Hindu nation and perpetuation of Brahminical values of birth based hierarchy of caste and gender, in newer garb. (1)

It is exclusively male organization and when Laxmibai Kelkar wanted women to be taken into RSS, they were advised to form a subordinate organization, Rashtra Sevika Samiti. In the very name of this organization the word *swayam* (self) is missing as this organization, like all other communal organizations it stands for superiority of males, believes in patriarchy. It discouraged people from participating in movements related to freedom. Barring few exceptions none from RSS went to jail during freedom movement. And those who happened to go to jail went either for looking for more recruits for RSS or accidentally went to jail and later on apologized to British and got themselves released from the prison.

RSS, Hindu Mahasbha held Gandhi as the person responsible for appeasement of Muslims, for partition of the country etc. On this charge Nathuram Godse and *ex-pracharak* (propagator) of RSS, who joined Hindu Mahasabha killed the father of the nation. At that point Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel said that it is due to the hate spread by RSS that the country had to lose its father, Gandhi. Savarkar was also one of the accused in the murder of Gandhi, but he was let off for lack of corroborative evidence.

RSS started forming other subordinate organizations. One of them was Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad, which started working amongst students. In 1951, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee of Hindu Mahasabha in collaboration with RSS formed Bhartiya Jansangh. Bhartiya Jan Sangh raised identity related issues and resorted to war mongering with aggressive postures towards neighbors. It also demanded that, Muslims should be Indianized. It remained a marginal force till it joined the Jaya Prakash movement and got the chance to become part of Janata Party. Meanwhile RSS was silently infiltrating in all the wings of state and society, bureaucracy, police, education, media, judiciary and army. It was working to oppose the progressive liberal values by promoting religiosity and conservatism in cultural arena. (2)

Jan Sangh joined Janata Party which came to power in 1977; its leaders became the part of Government. Using this opportunity they further planted their workers in media and other parts of the state apparatus. After splitting Janata Party, the Jan Sangh component remerged as Bhartiya Janta party on the ideology of Gandhian Socialism. RSS, BJP are neither Gandhian nor believe in socialism. This phrase was picked up for electoral purposes. RSS lent support to Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 elections. Meanwhile it gave birth to Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram. VHP started taking up emotive issues and Ram temple issue was made the center of their political credo. Also they went on to form Bajrang dal on the lines of storm troopers of Nazi party in Germany. (3)

During 1960s and 1980s, also it kept doing its work of propagating 'Hate against minorities', first against Muslims and later against Christians. The result was anti minority violence. In anti Muslim violence, amongst the victims of violence around 80% are Muslims. Most of the inquiry committee reports have concluded that riots are generally begun by RSS affiliates, pretexts are created for that in advance. Also due to communalization of state apparatus most of the guilty of the crime are generally not punished. Many a times other political leaders have also used the communal violence for their narrow political goals. The agitation around Ram Temple created a great deal of social hysteria, leading to Babri demolition and

intense violence in Mumbai-Bhopal-Surat and other places. Mumbai violence of 92-93 shook the whole country and instilled a great amount of fear amongst the minorities.

Due to violence the RSS base went on becoming larger and its political wing BJP went on becoming stronger to the extent that it could grab power at the center in 1996. Later again it came to power and ruled the country, under RSS supervision for six years. From 1997, in order to scare away the Christian missionaries from Adivasi areas, where their work is leading to empowerment of poor Adivasis, the violence started and during its course, they also burnt Pastor Graham Stewart stains, on the charge that he is doing conversion work. The Wadhwa Commission, which went into investigating this murder, opined that Pastor had not done any work of conversions. (4) Most horrific form of anti Christian violence was witnessed in the BJP ruled Gujarat and later BJP ally Biju Janata dal ruled Orissa (2008). With every act of communal violence BJP becomes stronger.

From 2014 when BJP has come to power with a simple majority in Lok Sabha, RSS agenda is going on in full flow. All its progeny-affiliates have intensified their activities in all arena of society leading to rising intolerance, curb on freedom of expression, erosion of autonomy of academic institutions and intimidations of religious minorities by throwing up assertions that Bharat Mata ki Jai will have to be said by all, around the issue of beef and keeping alive the Ram Temple issue.

## **Fundamentalist Politics Independent India**

RSS did not participate in freedom movement. After murder of Mahatma Gandhi by its ex Pracharak Nathuram Godse it got a slight set back. Due to the communal poison spread in society the riots got revived with the Jabalpur communal violence (1961), and this set the trend for the divisive violence dominating the scene in different states. Decade of 1980s saw the rise of communal politics at a higher pitch.

## **Communal Violence**

As the communal violence started worsening in intensity, social polarization was the result which led to strengthening of communalism. Attack on secular values started around this time and the minimalist affirmative action for minorities started being looked down upon as appeasement of minorities. As such also it was not the appeasement of Muslims; it was appeasement of a section of fundamentalist leadership from among the Muslim community. (5) Adding on to anti Muslim violence, anti Christian violence was orchestrated on the pretext that Christians are converting and burning of Pastor Stains and Kandhamal carnage came as horrific attack on security of minorities. (6) The major acts of violence took place in the decade of 1980s with the rise of Ram Temple movement and after the demolition of Babri Masjid on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992; severe riots broke out in Mumbai, Bhopal, Surat among other places. Gujarat violence (2002) was unleashed on the pretext of Godhra Train burning. In 2008 the anti Christian violence peaked in Kandhamal. The anti Christian violence began in the decade of 1990s on the pretext of conversions. The

burning of Pastor Graham Stuart Stains in 1999 was a horrific crime followed by sporadic anti Christian violence in Adivasi areas in particular. Later on the pretext of Love Jihad Muzzafarnagar violence gripped UP. With BJP led NDA coming to power from 2014 the acts of violence have seen a rise.

The divisive agenda, the hate speech during this period has been at the rise. At the end of first year there was a noticeable increase in the incidents of communal violence. The report of Anhad tells us, "At least 43 deaths in over 600 cases of violence, 194 targeting Christians and the rest Muslims, have taken place in Between 26th May 2014 and 13th May 2015, marking almost one year of the National Development Alliance government of Mr. Narendra Modi... In the very first few weeks of the new government, by its own admission, 113 communal incidents took place in various parts of the country during in just the two moths May-June 2014 in which 15 people were killed and 318 others were injured... The government, which routinely and selectively leaks information to the media to target civil society, does not keep the monthly reports on communal and targeted violence. (7)

The situation has been well summed up by Porf Nitasha Kaul, who points out the deeper dynamics of the present situation, "Modi's India has seen an unprecedented turning up of the volume of violence, intolerance and intimidation against those seen as the 'Other' by the majoritarian Hindu nationalists. Far from being accidental, this narrowing of the space of dissent in a democracy has been systematically enabled by a government that is closely aligned to the RSS and various Sangh Parivar affiliates and consciously chooses to ignore, downplay or condone the attacks against the person, property, beliefs and symbolism of those who are marginalized."(8)

### **Mass Lynching: Cow as mother**

In the series of throwing up emotive issues, RSS brought up the issue of Holy cow, ban on beef, among others. Those alleged of having killed cow have been mob lynched. Those carrying beef have been killed in the trains; those carrying the cattle have been subjected to same fate while those dealing with dead cattle have been flogged mercilessly as in Una.

Modi had said "Rana Pratap dedicated his life to *gau raksha* (cow protection). He fought wars and sacrificed young men to protect the cow..." He also derogatorily referred to export of beef as Pink revolution and criticized the same. He accused that if Congress comes to power and for the sake of beef export cows will be slaughtered ( 9)

Talking at economic level cow has been an important part of the agricultural economy. The old bullocks and cows being used for food by large sections of society has been the norm. Apart from Adivasis, sections of dalits, Muslims, Christians and even upper caste Hindus consumed beef, as a cheap and rich source of protein. Being a large country with big cattle strength, India is also one of the major exporters of beef.

Historically; it is interesting to note that beef was part of food habits from Vedic times. Cow got transformed in to mother hood and a major tool of identity politics later. Bhimrao Ambedkar in his

celebrated essay “Did Hindus never eat beef?” demonstrates this very well. At popular level Swami Vivekananda confirms the findings of historians like Prof D.N.Jha, who traces the history of beef consumption in Vedic times. Swamiji points out, “You will be astonished if I tell you that, according to old ceremonials, he is not a good Hindu who does not eat beef. On certain occasions he must sacrifice a bull and eat it.” (10)

In Una incident on 11<sup>th</sup> July (2016) in a village of Una taluka in Gujarat the cow vigilantes beat up the members of dalit family who were skinning the dead cow. The cow had been killed by a lion. The cow vigilantes dragged four dalits, tied them to a SUV, dragged them to Una town and in front of a police station stripped them above the vest and mercilessly beat them. (11) To add salt to the injury they videotaped the whole incident and circulated it. This enraged the dalit community who started the spontaneous protest and refused to bury the dead cows. They took the carcass of dead animals and put them in front of Collector’s offices. Nearly thirty youth tried to commit suicide. There was a massive mobilization of the dalits all over the state where they resolved that they will not handle the dead animals from now on with the rider that those who regard Cow as their mother should do the last rites of *their mother*. This is coming up as one of the major social protest movements.(12)

According to the data collected by IndiaSpend, based on the content analysis of media reporting, “Muslims were the target of 51% of violence centered on bovine issues over nearly eight years (2010 to 2017) and comprised 86% of 28 Indians killed in 63 incidents. As many of 97 per cent of these attacks were reported after Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government came to power in May 2014, and about half the cow-related violence — 32 of 63 cases –were from states governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when the attacks were reported, revealed our analysis of violence recorded until June 25, 2017.” (13) The duplicity of RSS-BJP on the issue is very obvious as in Kerala, Goa and Norht Eastern states they are quiet about it.

## **Hate Speech**

Hate speech has been the major ground on which minorities are targeted and atmosphere of intolerance is created. From 2014 different wings of RSS have become hyper active with the knowledge that it is ‘their’ government and they can get away with their blatant activities. BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj not only said that Godse was a patriot; he also went on to say that Hindu women should produce four children, as Muslims are overtaking the population. (14) Sadhvi Prachi went to prescribe eight children for Hindu women. She also gave a call that the Muslim film actors, Aamir Khan, Shahrukh Khan and Salman Khan should be boycotted. Pravin Togadia has been the leading person in making hate speeches; he has the highest number of cases regarding hate speech against him. Yogi Adityanath, BJP’s MP keeps making very derogatory remarks, He said that in ‘love jihad’ if one Hindu girl is converted then 100 Muslim girls should be converted to Hinduism. The propaganda around love jihad keeps simmering and various small and big leaders keep using it to divide the society. Same Yogi went on to say that Mosques should be converted into den of pigs and that Muslims should not be allowed to come to Hindu holy places (15).

Two central ministers of Modi Sarkar, Sadhvi Niranjani Jyoti and Giriraj Singh made very insulting and humiliating remarks about non-Hindus and the color of skin of UPA chief Sonia Gandhi. Niranjani Jyoti stated that all those who are non-Hindus are illegitimate, *Haramzade*. Giriraj Singh had earlier said that those not voting for Modi should go to Pakistan. Interestingly he said this before the elections and despite such a record he was elevated to the level of minister in the Modi Sarkar. He made racial comments about Sonia Gandhi recently. Sakshi Mahraj also held Godse as a patriot, while another party colleague of his from Kerala, one Gopal Krishnan wrote in RSS mouthpiece *Keasri* that Godse chose a wrong target in killing Gandhi, he should have killed Nehru instead. (16)

## **Growing intolerance**

As BJP led NDA came to power from 2014, the RSS agenda has been in full flow. Beginning with September 2015 we witnessed a flood of 'returning' honors by writers, scientists and artists. There are also various statements from academics, historians, artists and scientists showing their concern about the growing intolerance and erosion of our plural values. Those who returned the honors are amongst the outstanding contributors to literature, arts, film making and science. They in a way have been pouring their heart out at what is going on at social level. The growing intolerance has taken the lives of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi. There are incidents like where the lynching of one Muslim on the issue of beef eating which has shaken the conscience of the society.

In the face of this strong statement from diverse sections of society those related to the ruling party, BJP; its parent organization RSS and many of its affiliates; have been strongly criticizing these people by saying as to how come it is intolerance now just because of few incidents here and there. A section of social media is mocking those who returned their well earned and well deserved awards.

At the same time the President of India disturbed by the happenings in the society; time and again has been reminding the nation about our core civilizational values of pluralism. (17) The vice President has told that it is the duty of the state to protect the 'right to life' of citizens. The international agency Moody Analytics pointed out that unless Modi reins in his colleagues, India stands to lose her credibility. Disturbed by the current growing atmosphere of intolerance the eminent citizens are feeling uncomfortable. So we have the earlier statement of Julio Rebeiro that 'as a Christian I am a stranger in my country'. Now Naseeruddin Shah said that he is being made to realize his Muslim identity for the first time and later he expressed extreme anger when police officer Subodh Kumar Singh was killed by the mob which had gathered to protest against the cow killing in Bulanshahr (18).

A saffron clad swami, Swami Agnivesh has been targeted by the followers of Hindu nationalist brigade. This attack on him is in the series which began with murder of Dr. Dabholkar, and later took the lives of Com. Govind Pansare, Dr. Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh. (19) As intolerance is growing in the society, those having opinions contrary to ruling dispensation are being targeted. As the culprits are enjoying impunity, appreciation from the leaders of ruling party, they know they can get away with hate crimes of this dastardly nature. Let's imagine, a saffron clad Swami is coming to pay last respects to the ex Prime Minister of India and he is heckled and insulted! These hooligans, drunk on fake nationalism and false pride in

things in the name of religion, get encouragement from the powers that be, the real culprits are those who support them, appreciate them, those who in the first place disseminate this ideology which is sectarian and looks down their opponents or their ideas as anti national or anti religion.

## **Education**

The major impact of the BJP led NDA regime (1998-2004) was the changes in the history and social science books, where the divisive history taught in the RSS shakhas, the communal history, the history where the kings are looked at through the prism of religion, was intensified. One knows that the communal historiography introduced by British was their main tool in implementing the 'divide and rule' policy which formed the ideology of the communal streams of Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha-RSS. This type of history; by focusing on the glories of 'our' kings also promotes the feudal values of caste and gender hierarchy. Mercifully the BJP led NDA lost in 2004 and the rational, national historiography was brought back.

Now the government is out to change the total education system and the content of history, social science and other books. Even before this Government came to power, with the rise of Modi on political firmament, with the perception that he is likely to come to power, the Right wing organizations intensified their offensive against genuine scholarship. Dinanath Batra, who is heading the RSS outfits, Shiksha Bachao Abhiyan Samiti and RSS-affiliated Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas (SSUN) from many decades succeeded in pressuring Penguin, the World's largest publisher, to pulp Wendy Doniger's scholarly book 'The Hindus: An Alternate History'. This book brings out through the interpretation of mythology the need to understand the caste and gender aspects in a sensitive manner. (20) The history she has focused on goes against the hierarchical mind set of RSS combine and so pressure was put to pulp it. Now Mr. Batra emerges as a writer himself and a set of nine books written by him have been translated in to Gujarati and introduced in 42000 schools in Gujarat. This may be a trial run before doing similar things at larger scale. Former BJP president and present union minister M Venkaiah Naidu explicitly stated as early as last year (June 23, 2013) that "it (the BJP) will change textbook syllabi, if it returns to power". Batra is also quoted as saying that a "nationalistic education system has to be developed to address the requirements and through this we have to develop a young generation that is committed to Hindutva and nationalism" (21).

The sampling of Batra's books gives a good idea of what is in store for us. A quote from one of the set of books, 'Tejomaya Bharat', (Radiant Bharat) tells us "America wants to take the credit for invention of stem cell research, but the truth is that India's Dr Balkrishna Ganpat Matapurkar has already got a patent for regenerating body parts...You would be surprised to know that this research is not new and that Dr Matapurkar was inspired by the Mahabharata. Kunti had a bright son like the Sun itself. When Gandhari, who had not been able to conceive for two years, learnt of this, she underwent an abortion. From her womb a huge mass of flesh came out. (Rishi) Dwaipayana Vyas was called. He observed this hard mass of flesh and then he preserved it in a cold tank with specific medicines. He then divided the mass of flesh into 100 parts and kept them separately in 100 tanks full of ghee for two years. After two years, 100 Kauravas were born of it. On reading this, he (Matapurkar) realized that stem cell was not his invention. This was found in India thousands of years ago. (Page 92-93) (22)

Indian rishis using their yog vidya would attain *divya drishti (divine vision)*. There is no doubt that the invention of television goes back to this... In Mahabharata, Sanjaya sitting inside a palace in Hastinapur and using his divya shakti would give a live telecast of the battle of Mahabharata... to the blind Dhritarashtra. (Page 64) What we know today as the motorcar existed during the Vedic period. It was called anashva rath. Usually a rath (chariot) is pulled by horses but an anashva rath means the one that runs without horses or yantra-rath, what is today a motorcar. The Rig Veda refers to this. (Page 60) Narendra Modi himself gave the lead in the direction of change in the system of knowledge when he said that the plastic surgery-head transplant were already there in ancient India. This he had said while inaugurating a modern Hospital in Mumbai. (23)

RSS has already set up a consultative body called Bharatiya Shiksha Niti Ayog (BSNA) to put pressure on Modi's government to "correct or Indianize" the national education system. In the new syllabus "The passages in the textbooks which pointed out to any unsavory aspect of the Hindu faith like the oppressive caste system in ancient Hindu society, untouchability of the low-caste people and consumption of beef during Vedic ages were scrapped, and anyone who resisted or opposed the changes was dubbed as 'anti-national'." (24) The major initiatives in this direction are to promote Sanskrit on one hand to bring in Yoga exercises and courses in the educational system.

### **Educational Institutions**

One after the other news of Government intervention in different institutions, more so the nationally well known ones started disturbing us. There was the case of IIT Madras where Periyar Ambedkar Study Circle was banned. Then IIT Delhi Director Prof Shevgaonkar resigned due to high handed attitude of the Ministry of MHRD. Close to follow suit was Prof Anil Kakodkar who resigned from the Chairmanship of the Board of Governors of IIT Bombay.

The case of FTII Pune dragged for a long time as students opposed the appointment of a RSS-BJP sympathizer, a B grade film actor, Gajendra Chauhan. Students went on for a long strike and after trying to make their point for eight long months, withdrew their strike as the recalcitrant government refused to heed to the demands of students. (25) Many other incidents kept happening including those of Allahabad University, Ferguson College in Pune among others. Two incidents which stood out and shook the student community were related to Hyderabad Central University (HCU) and the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

In HCU the local BJP MP, on insistence from the ABVP branch of the university, wrote to MHRD Minister that anti-national and casteist activities are going on and action should be taken against the students belonging to Ambedkar Students Association (ASA). Incidentally the ASA was opposed as they had organized meetings which were opposed by ABVP as per their political agenda. (26) Many incidents were cited as the reason for the complaint by ABVP. One of these was the screening of the film 'Muzzafarnagar Baki hai', a film on Muzzafarnagar violence in UP. Then there was beef festival and a meeting which was organized to oppose the death penalty to Afzal Guru. The argument of ASA was that the death penalty is inhuman and it is opposite of what the norms of a civil society should be.

The local BJP MP wrote a complaint to the MHRD ministry. Under the pressure of MHRD ministry the Vice Chancellor expelled Vemula and few others from the hostel and stopped their fellowship. This is what forced him to take his life. In the case of JNU, the issue of patriotism was brought up in a deliberate way. In a program organized in JNU some masked students came in and shouted anti India slogans. Kanhiaya Kumar and two other friends were not a part of this meeting or part of slogan shouting gang. Incidentally the slogan shouters have not been apprehended and identified so far, for the reasons best known to the authorities. On the contrary the authorities arrested Kanhaiya, Anirban and Umar Khalid on the charges of sedition. A doctored video was played repeatedly by some channels and it became clear that arrested student leaders of JNU had nothing to do with anti India sloganeering. Incidentally the occasion was that of the anniversary of Afzal Guru. As far Afzal Guru is concerned lesser said the better! BJP after hectic deliberations have tied up with the PDP in Kashmir (2016) and PDP upholds Afzal Guru as a martyr and someone who did not get justice. So it becomes clear that BJP is using the JNU issue to build up an emotive issue out of the whole thing. (27)

## Summing Up

Fundamentalism is a politics in the garb of religion. It sounds to be a religion but it is an attempt to impose certain tenets on the society. The values which are feudal, pre industrial are picked up and imposed on the society. It was done in America in 1920s in the name of Christianity. In West Asia, many Muslim majority countries have shown this trend in the name of Islam, Islamic fundamentalism particularly in Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc. RSS, Hindu fundamentalism is a well organized trend which aims to bring in values of caste and gender hierarchy. This is the deeper agenda of RSS, while at surface it comes as anti Muslim and anti Muslim politics and violence against them.

It is an organization which controls the politics, in that sense it is a supra political organization, while it claims to be a cultural organization. It takes up issues related to identity, Ram Temple, Holy cow, love jihad, ghar wapasi. These create an emotive atmosphere, hatred against minorities and posit its agenda of bringing in glorious past. Its opposition to Indian Constitution and projecting Holy books as the source of great values manifest through various of its affiliate organizations. It has percolated in society a view of Indian history and society which gives exclusive ownership of the land to Hindus, in a way upper caste Hindus. Its version of Hinduism is the Brahmanical variety from among diverse streams of Hinduism. Its assertions are based on make believe constructions of past glories and achievements, which are more of a fiction than reality.

There is a need to strengthen the values which we achieved through freedom movement, the values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity which are enshrined in our Constitution. Promotion of pluralism and protection of minority rights have to be at the core of our campaigns and struggles which aim at a democratic society.

## Foot Notes

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