

EARLY THOMAS CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

It is the common man's understanding that the advent of the Europeans in the 15th C.A.D. commensurate with the arrival of Christianity in India. But the renowned scholars have recorded that the gospel of Jesus Christ had been sown in the Indian soil in the very inception of the Christ Era. As of today many a scholar, secular as well as Christian, from India and from abroad have written with substantial evidences, historical accounts and proofs to show that the above statement is a reality.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his 'Glimpses of World History' writes as follows ;

"You may be surprised to learn Christianity came to India long before it went to England and or Western Europe, and when even in Rome it was a despised and proscribed sect - within hundred years or so of the death of Jesus, Christian Missionaries came to South India by sea. They were received courteously and permitted to preach their new faith. They converted a large number of people, and their descendants have lived there, with varying fortunes, to this day. Most of them belong to old Christian sects, which have ceased to exist in Europe"¹

The above historical perspective of Nehru was attested by the Indian Philosopher S. Radhakrishnan as,

"Christianity has flourished in India from the beginning of the Christian era. The Syrian Christians of Malabar believe that their form of Christianity is Apostolic derived directly from the Apostle Thomas. They contend that their version of Christian faith is distinctive and independent of the forms established by St. Peter and St. Paul in the West. What is obvious is that there have been Christians in the West Coast of India from very early times. They were treated with great respect by the Hindus, whose princes built for them Churches"².

It is said here, "the Roman Breviary states that St. Thomas preached the Christian truth to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Hyrcanians and Beactrins that finally he taking to himself to the Indians, he instructed them in the Christian religion and that he died martyr at Calamina (i.e. Mylapore)".³

Marco Polo (1293 A.D.) has written about the ministry of St. Thomas in his travel document. Yule has said, 'that the tradition of St. Thomas preaching in India is very old, so old that it probably is, in its simple form, true.'⁴

Authors have suggested the possible route of St. Thomas the Apostle to India. Dr. Farquahar gives a probable route : "Apostle St. Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus sailed from Alexandria to the Indus and reached the Kings capital 'Taxila' (Presently known as Punjab) about A.D. 48-49. He left Taxila when the Punjab and its capital were seized by the 'Indo - Seythian Kushans' from China about A.D. 50 and went from there to 'Muziri' (Presently known as Kodungallur in Kerala) on the Malabar coast via Socotra reaching Muziri in A.D. 51-52."⁵

The above are a few references out of a hoard of materials available in support of the spread of Christianity in India by Apostle Thomas in the very first century of our Lord.

If it is true, what was the fate of early Indian Christianity. Has it undergone an unceremonial burial in the milieu of political upheavals, foreign invasions, religious intolerance and conspiracy etc.? This paper attempts to investigate into some reliable factors to show a bird's eye-view about the Early Christianity in India. For this, we need to understand the religious background in India before CE.

INDIAN RELIGIONS IN BC

Jainism and Buddhism were the two major religions founded in India and were propagated throughout the length and breadth of India. Jains claim that Jainism existed long before Mahavira was born and Mahavira reformed Jainism and gave it more exposure. He was the 24th and last Tirthankara and lived around 6c. B.C. Buddhism was a contemporaneous religion with Jainism and the Buddha who was born around 566 B.C. and after his enlightenment he preached his findings. These were the two major atheistic religions founded and propagated in India. No other theistic religions were founded and practiced in India till the dawn of the CE. Then, how do we account for Hinduism ?

HINDUISM

In the preliminary context it is to be admitted that Hinduism or Hindu religion is a misnomer. 'Hindu', as such, is not a religious term and it is more of a territorial name. The name India derived from the name of the river 'Sind'. "The Greeks talked of the Indus and Indians. In Hebrew it is 'hoddu'. The Aramaic is 'hendu'. The Syriac is 'Hendo'. In Latin it is India... Hindu names reaching the West generally drop the 's' and substitute 'h' in Persian mouth. The Persians softened the initial 's' to 'h'. Thus the Avesta word is Hindu.... The word reached Greece through Persia. So 'Sindhu' became 'hindu' in Persian writings."⁶

The territorial name 'hindu' was very conveniently used by Sir William Jones, the former Supreme Court Judge of British India in 1794 A.D. to refer to the religion of the people of India as 'Hinduism'. The coinage of the term Hinduism is only 216 years old and we have no records, with the available data, to show that Hinduism was in vogue prior to Sir William Jones.

HINDU RELIGION

The Supreme Court of India, very recently had pronounced a judgement that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. It is absolutely true that Hinduism is synonymous with Hindutva, a way of life where people have no social equality. It professes the hierarchy of casteism.

But we know it for sure that what we understand as Hindu faith is Hindu religion which is another name for 'sixfold religion'. Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktam, Gaumaram, Ganapatyam and Sauram are collectively named as 'sixfold religion'. These six religions are grouped into two major heads viz. Saivism and Vaishnavism. These two are presently known by the nomenclature, Hindu religion.

Tamil Bhakti movement which originated in Tamil Nadu in the 6th or 7th centuries had given birth to Saivism and Vaishnavism and the scholars attribute Thirukkural as the propelling force for the origin and development of Tamil Bhakti movement. A.K. Majumdar in his book quotes the following Sanskrit verse :

*"Utpanna Dravida Bhakti
Vridhim Karnatake gata
Kvachit Kvachin Maharastre
Gurjare Pralayam gata*

*That is, the cult Bhakti originated in the Dravida country, flourished in Karnataka ; had a sporadic success in Maharashtra and was unsuccessful in Gujarat. It is difficult to assess the value of this statement, but we have seen that popular bhakti cult began in Dravida."⁷
('Dravida', here refers to present Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra and Karnataka states of Southern India.)*

The hymns sung by 'Nayanmars' (Saivite Saints) and the Pasurams by Azhwars (Vaishnavite saints) during the period ranging between 5th and 9th centuries are the scriptural songs of Saivism and Vaishnavism. Surprisingly, the scholars assert that the Bhakti movement was not contributed by the four Vedas of the Aryans. If not the Vedas, what could have been the impelling source for the birth of Bhakti marg is a valid and logical question which begs for an answer. A few contemporary scholars have brought out several books, with extensive research scholarship, on Bhakti movement and Early Indian Christianity and they have established a link between India and Palastine.

ST. THOMAS AND INDIA

The traditional stories of the Church associated with Apostle Thomas have been proved to be a historical reality. It is put by Gillbert Slater in the following manner :

*"It was St. Thomas, one of the Chief disciples of Christ, who first brought Christianity to the Malayalam speaking area at a time when the language spoken there was Tamil. Malayalam developed into a separate language only a few centuries later. He came in 52 A.D. in a merchant ship, landed in Kodungaloor Post, and propagated the Christian religion for the first time in India. Afterwards, at several times numerous Christians from Syria immigrated into Malabar, converted local inhabitants and enlarged the Christian Community."*⁸

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad, the first President of free India and other reputed scholars also have attested the arrival of Christianity in the Indian soil in the very first century of our Lord. Nehru has acknowledged that,

*"Both of these (Christianity and Hebrew religion) had probably reached India during the first century after and both had found a place in the country. There were a number of Syrian Christians and Nestorians in South India and they were as much a part of the country as anyone else."*⁹

The First visit of St. Thomas to India is dealt with elaborately with a great deal of historical evidence by James Kurikilankatt in his book "First Voyage of the Apostle Thomas in India. 'Acts of Thomas', an apogryphal literature discovered at Nag Hammdi in 1945 is considered to be an important source which narrates about Apostle Thomas' evangelistic work in Taxila and his association with Gondophares, a great king who had begun to rule in 21 A.D. 'The apostle met the king in the royal palace, which according to the Acts of Thomas was well inside the city walls. The Acts of Thomas mentions about the king of India and the researches now assert that it was Gondophares who ruled over the large area of land beyond the Indus to which the Syrian and Persian writers very often gave the name India or Hindu. J. Charpentier endorses this view in his book. 'St. Thomas the Apostle and India'.¹⁰

The inscription of Takht-i-Bahi dated 46 A.D. makes Gondophares a real contemporary of St. Thomas. And the readings of the coins of Gondophares would ascribe his death in 51 A.D. or even later. The visit of the apostle in all probability in the same period.¹¹ Kaa. Naa. Subramaniam after an analysis opines that the apostle's first visit to India must be in 49 A.D.

Many books have been attributed to St. Thomas. The Acts of Thomas, Book of Thomas the Contender, Acts of Thomas, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, and Apocalypse of Thomas. All these works are believed to have come from an ascetic, pre-Manichen Christianity of Osthoeine (Eastern Syria between Edessa and Messene).¹² Amongst these, the Acts of Thomas is a very important one. It was transmitted in the Syriac language as well as Greek : for technical reason most specialists hold that Syriac must have been the original language of its composition. In all probability it should have been composed in Edessa sometime between 230 and 250 AD.

MALABAR AND ST. THOMAS

The Malabar tradition puts Apostle Thomas' arrival at Kodungallur (Muziri) in 52 A.D. and his evangelical mission of preaching the gospel commenced with his establishing of seven and a half churches in Tamil Country (Malabar, Chera Nadu of Old Tamil Nadu) Viz. Kodungaloor, Palayur, Parur, Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Kollam, Chayal and Thiruvithankodu (half church) near Kanyakumari. In Malayalam, they are known as 'Aezharaip Palli'.

In Chera Tamil Country of the east coast St. Thomas met with much success and converted a local king who was publicly baptised. The account given by the popular Ramban song, though of a later period, considered representative of most versions, says the apostle landed in Maliankara in 50 A.D. after and a short stay, he went to Mylapore and China. He returned to Mylapore and sailed to Maliankara at the invitation of the king of Thiruvanchikulam, Kodungalloor. In 59 A.D. i.e., in the month of Kannit (Spt. - Act.) ; he was called back to Mylapore via Malayatur and revisited the Churches he had founded during his first missionary expedition. In 69 A.D. he returned to Mylapore via Chayal.¹³

COROMANDAL TRADITION

Apostle Thomas' ministry had last for about two decades in Mylapore. Three important places associated with Coromandal tradition are :

- a) Mylapore
- b) Chinnamalai (Little Mount), and
- c) Periya Malai (St. Thomas Mount)

These places are preserved by the Catholic Church to the present day as historically important places of Thomas' mission. Chinnamalai, now is within the limits of Chennai City adjacent to Saidapettai, is reckoned as the place of his deliberation and preaching of the gospel.

Apostle Thomas was pierced with a lance when he was praying before the cross which was carved out by Thomas himself at Periyamalai or St. Thomas Mount. This cross and the painting of Mary with Infant Jesus, believed to have been painted by St. Luke are preserved in the altar of the Church atop 'Calamina' (Persian name for Periyamalai). He was martyred in 72 A.D. and was buried in Mylapore and his sepulture is still there in Santhome Basilica with renovated structure preserved in a serene atmosphere.

According to another version, his remains were exhumed, carried to Edessa, again in the 13th Century exhumed and taken to Ortona in Italy where they are believed to rest today¹⁴ St. Chrysostom (AD 347 - 407), St. Jerome (AD 340 - 420) and Gregory of Tours (AD 540 - 594) also speak of the mission of St. Thomas in India. We shall now go on to look briefly into the impact of the ministry of St. Thomas.

THOMAS CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

It was discussed in the beginning that Jainism and Buddhism were the two major atheistic religions founded and were preached in India before the advent of Apostle Thomas. Vedism was alien to the land of India and it was in the form of verbal transmission of the Aryans and they professed only the preliminary, under - developed and polytheistic method of worship. They, in fact, according to the celebrated scholars, were the Aryan worship and not their religion. The oral Vedic mantras were collected and compiled by Vyasa, a Dravidian seer, probably after the 4c A.D. because Vedas are in classical Sanskrit. The first epigraphic evidence to Sanskrit is available only in the 2c A.D.

SANSKRIT :

The first evidence of classical Sanskrit is attested by an inscription dating around A.D. 150 in the Brahmi script.¹⁵ It records the repair of a dam originally built by Chandragupta Maurya, and also contains a panegyric in verse which can be regarded as the first literary composition in classical Sanskrit. It is at Girnar in Kathiawar and was inscribed by Rudradamana, the Saka Satrap of Ujjayini, on the same rock on which the fourteen Rock Edicts of Ashoka were also found. 'It is significant that Rudradamana employed classical Sanskrit in a region where about four hundred years before him Ashoka had used only Prakrit. So the absence of Sanskrit in his inscriptions indicates that it did not exist at all that time, as otherwise he would have certainly used it.'¹⁶

The Scriptures of Hindu religion are written in Sanskrit, and epigraphic evidence clearly shows that they could not have been written before A.D. 2nd Century.

ALEXANDER HARRIS FURTHER STATES :

“The bibliographical evidences indicate that the Vedas are written in the Grantha and Nagari scripts, and according to tradition Veda Vyasa, a Dravidian, compiled and wrote Vedas. The Grantha script belongs to the Southern group of scripts and Veda Vyasa being a Dravidian would certainly have used it. Since the earliest evidence of Grantha is only in the 5th c. A.D. the Vedas were written rather late.”^{16a}

Hence it is ruled out that the Aryan Vedas had been the source of Hindu religion. Buddhism and Jainism, obviously, could not have given rise to the Tamil Bhakti movement and to the development of Saivism and Vaishnavism as they are atheistic religions. But in all probability, the only source and propelling force behind Bhakti movement and Tamil religion should have been the apostolic mission of St. Thomas which began in A.D. 49 in Taxila and in AD 52 in Tamil Nadu.

The scriptural literature of Saivism known as ‘Paniru Thirumurai’ and ‘Saiva Siddhanta’ and of the Vaishnavism known as ‘Naalaayira Thivyap Prabhandam’ are in Tamil language. While the religious scriptures are in Tamil, the Vedanta texts viz. Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita are in Sanskrit. The religion of the Tamils and Vedanta, are the two faces of the same coin that got developed through St. Thomas’ evangelism. A brief sketch shall throw more light about the veracity of this statement in the following lines.

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON THIRUKKURAL

Sage Thiruvalluvar is regarded as a contemporary of Apostle Thomas who also lived in Mylapore. The first four chapters of Thirukkural are named as ‘Paayiram’ (the invocation and an introductory to the content of the book) wherein the Triune God is invoked : God the Father in ‘Kadavul Vaazhthu’ (I Chapter); God the Holy Spirit in ‘Vaan Cirappu’ (II Chapter) ; and God the Son in ‘Neethaar Perumai’ (III Chapter). The one who sacrificed his five senses is termed as ‘Ainthaviththaan’ (Thirukkural 6, 25) The Sacrifice of God Incarnate is narrated in Thirukkural as follows :

*“Pori Vaayil ainthaviththaan poitheer olukka
Neri ninraar needu vaazhvaar”*

*(Those who follow the one, who sacrificed his five senses on an instrument and showed us
the way and who is the life and truth will have eternal life).*

(Thirukkural, 6)

Here ‘Pori’ (instrument) refers to cross because cross or crucifixion were alien to Indian soil.

‘Ainthaviththaan’ is a word coined by Thiruvalluvar to refer to God and it does not refer to a hermit or a Sanyasin because the first chapter occurs in ‘Kadavul Vaazhthu’ (Invocation to God). The Scholars hold that Thirukkural which was composed either in the later part of A.D. 1st Century or in the early part of AD 2nd had given rise to the Bhakti movement which in turn had given rise to Saivism and Vaishnavism.

SAIVISM AND VAISHNAVISM :

The above two major religions developed around 7th c. A.D. ‘Ceyon’, ‘Centazhalon’, ‘Thee vannan’ are the names attributed to Siva. They all refer to God who is as red as fire hence the name Sivan. God encountered Moses in the form of fire on Mt. Horeb¹⁷, when Moses went up on the Mt. Sinai to receive ten commandments, it was wrapped in fire and smoke as the Lord had descended upon it.¹⁸ When the people of Israel were led out of captivity from Egypt, God went forth in the pillar of fire during night and in the pillar of cloud during day. ‘And God the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord.’¹⁹ Therefore, Vaishnavites call His name as ‘Mega Vannan’ (The one whose complexion is like the cloud).

But a new meaning was attributed to ‘Sivam’ meaning Love, ‘Anbe Sivam’ (God is Love) and ‘Vishnu’ (Corrupt form of Tamil Word Vin) meaning ‘heaven’. The basic and fundamental doctrine of Vaishnavism is redemption through the incarnation of God. The main purpose of ‘avatar’ in Vaishnavite mythological expositions is to redeem the world and to protect it from demon and his deceptive means to enslave the mankind so as to keep them ever remain under his evil powers.

The fundamental doctrines are encoded in Saiva Siddhanta in the form of aphorism texts and it speaks about the creation of the universe, the first man and woman and how the fall of the first man and woman had led the whole creation to fall into Sin. Sivagnanapotham, the theological foundation of Saivism says this as follows :

*“Avan aval athu yennum avai moovinaimaiyin
Thorriya thithiyea odungi malaththulathaam
Antham aathi enmanar pulavar”*

(In the beginning God created man (avan - first man), woman (aval - first woman), and the world (athu) in three different actions and they were holy. But later on they fell into sin (malam) which ended the life of holiness and it was the beginning of sin, thus say the learned.²⁰

The grace of God flourished into the redemptive act of God through His incarnation is elucidated in Sivagnanabodham that God became a man with five senses - a Guru and he observed the penence of suffering of death in order to redeem mankind. It is explained as follows :

*“Aimpula vedarin ayanthanai Valarthena
Tham muthal Guruvumaai thavaththinil vunarththa vittu
Anniyam inmaiin Aran Kazhal selumae”*

(God who came into this world as a Guru on seeing the souls who are living in worldly pleasure by enjoying the pleasure of five senses, made them feel through his penence of suffering of death that they have forgotten their Creator and are living in sin. Once the soul is enlightened through his suffering, it repents its sins, and the separation with God is removed and reaches the feet of God.²¹

The salvific-love of God-Incarnate is the foundation and the corner stone of Vaishnavism. It is given in a nutshell in the lines of Nammaazhwar as follows :

*“Poininra gnanamum polla ozhukkum azhukkudambum
Inninra neermai ini yaam uraamai vuyir alippaan
Enninra yoniyumaaip piranthaai Imaiyor thalaivaa”*

(God was born from a noble woman in order to give us a new life so that deceptive knowledge, immorality and unclean body would never possess us)²².

The theological doctrines of Saivism and Vaishnavism which were developed during 12th - 14th C AD are immensely attributed to the Christian theology. It is difficult to explain all of them within the scope of this paper. Christian doctrines are also embedded in the tenets of Vedanta.

VEDANTA :

Upanishads, Brahmasutras and Bhagavad Gita are the primary texts of 'Prasthan Thraya' of Vedanta. The philosophy of Vedanta puts an end to the Vedic sacrificial worship and hence the name Vedanta - 'anta' = end - putting and end to Vedas. To draw an overall similarity between the Old Testament and Vedic sacrifice and between the New Testament and Vedanta, the former is Sacrificial Worship and the later is a religion of the fulfillment of sacrifice. Paul Deussen had brought out an analogy between the two as follows :

“For the Veda falls (as Cankara on Brih P. 4 ff. shows), according to the concept of Vedanta, into two parts, which show a far reaching analogy with Old and New Testaments, a part of works (Karma Kanda), which includes the Mantras and Brahmanas in general and a part of knowledge (Jnana Kanda) which includes the Upanishads and what belongs to them”.²³

He further goes on to say,

The work of Badarayana stands to the Upanishads in the same relation as Christian Dogmatics to the New Testament, it investigates the teaching about God, the world, the soul, its conditions of wandering and of deliverance, removes apparent contradictions, binds them systematically together, and is especially concerned to defend them against the attacks of the opponents".²⁴

Brahma Sutras of Badarayana (Vyasa) which explains about the basic doctrines or the philosophical tenets is held to be the essence of the Upanishads in the form of aphorism texts are unintelligible and incomprehensible and therefore this had led the readers to depend upon the commentaries of Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva for understanding the sutras. The scholars have shown that Sankara's commentaries are unreliable and disloyal to Badarayana and Vedanta.

Brahma Sutras describes God (Brahman) as the Creator - "Janmadyasya Yatah" ([Brahman] is He) from whom (proceed the creation, etc. of this universe)²⁵ It describes God as a Triune God 'Param'²⁶, 'Pati'²⁷ etc. - they speak about the creative power and transcendence of Almighty. It refers to God as the one who is endowed with human form - 'Rupa Upanyasat'.²⁸ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that God is 'Satya Brahman'²⁹ (Satyam = Truth). According to Brahma Sutras, Brahman is 'Prana Linga'³⁰ (Living Stone). He is 'Prana of Pranas'³¹ (Life). He is immanent - 'Antaryami' - 'Antaryami Yahitai Vatisu'³², He is 'Vaisvanara'³³. (Fire = Holy Spirit) Brahman is 'Nirguna' (Transcendent), Saguna (Incarnate) and 'Antaryami' (Immanent). The Characters attributed to Brahman in Vedanta Sutras are the Characters of Jesus.

The Hindu religion and Vedanta ascribe similar characters and attributives to God (Brahman) and to be precise, He is the God of Trinity. The following Table elucidates this :

Trinity in Indian Religions and Vedanta

Christianity	Thirukkural	Saivism	Vaishnavism	Vedanta	Mahayana Buddhism
God the Father	Kadavul	Param	Paraswarupam	Para Brahman	Dharma Kaya
God the Son	Neeththaar	Aparam	Vibhavam Vyuha Arca	Apara Brahman	Nirmana Kaya
God the Holy Spirit	Vaan	Paraparam	Antaryami	Takara Brahman	Samboga Kaya

The evangelical mission of Apostle Thomas also had its impact on Buddhism which under went a split in the CE and the later division is known as Mahayana, a bigger vehicle, which can accommodate more souls to be liberated. Moreover the Bodisatva doctrine is very much akin to Jesus himself. Some scholars also have evidenced that the split in Jainism as Digambara and Svetambara was due to the impact of Christianity.

CONCLUSION

The advent of Apostle Thomas had brought about a sea change in the Indian religious and philosophical history. The basic doctrines of Hindu religion and Vedanta are nothing but the doctrines of Christianity. The doctrine of Trinity, the doctrine of avatar, the doctrine of fulfillment of sacrifice, the doctrine of salvation by faith (saranagati), doctrine of bhakti, negation of cycle of birth, negation of stratified society in the name of caste are the basic doctrines on which the whole edifice of Hindu religion (Saivism and Vaishnavism) and Vedanta stand. They were neither contributed by the four Vedas nor were of the biproducts of the Aryan worship. They, without an iota of doubt, are the Christian dogmatics preached by Apostle Thomas. But the mythological writings and expositions over the period had corrupted and distorted the 'Early Thomas Christianity in India.'

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES ON THE HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA :

First International Conference on the History of Early Christianity in India was conducted at Concordia College, Bronxville, New York between August 13 and 16, 2005 and more than eighty scholars of international repute had presented research papers on Apostle Thomas' mission in India and its impact on Indian thought. At the concluding session of the Conference, the learned participants realised that the scope of research is colossal in scale and a further dwelling on the subject extending to Asia would be enlightening. Subsequent to this the second International Conference was held in Chennai from January 13 to 16, 2007. The research papers presented by the learned international scholars were compiled and released by International Centre for the Study of Christianity in India in 2009.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF LEADERSHIP TRAINING (NILT)

NILT was founded by a group of Christian friends who have the zeal to propagate the gospel to accomplish the 'Great Commission' of Jesus Christ, to the sons of Indian soil through contextualised methods of evangelism based on the Indian literature, scriptures of Saivism, Vaishnavism, Vedas and Vedanta. They also have devised separate curriculum to be taught in the Bible / Theological Colleges. They also provide crash courses and training programs for the benefit of the evangelists, clergy and the laity based on Thomas Christianity. NILT has published Ten Books, five in Tamil and five in English, written by Prof. Dr. J.D. BaskaraDoss, Vice President, Curriculum Director of National Institute of Leadership Training. Kindly visit our website : www.niltindia.org

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