

Socio-economic status of the Dongria Kondhs: A primitive Tribal group of Niyamgiri hills in Eastern Ghats of Orissa

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Introduction:

India has the second largest concentration of tribal population in the world next to Africa. According to Article 432 of the Constitution of India, the Scheduled Tribes (ST) refers to specific indigenous peoples whose status is acknowledged to some formal degree by appropriate national and state legislation. As per 2001 census, ST population was 84.3 million representing 8.2% of Indian population. A total of 461 ST groups have been identified, who are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country (Singh 1994). There are 6 predominantly tribal states where more than 50% population is ST (Mizoram 94.8%, Nagaland 87.7%, Meghalaya 85.5%, Arunachal Pradesh 63.7%, Union Territories of Lakshadweep 93.2% and Dadra & Nagar Haveli 79.0%). More than half of ST population in the country is concentrated in the states of Madhya Pradesh (23.3%), Orissa (22.2%), Gujarat (14.9%), Assam (12.8%), Rajasthan (12.4%), Maharashtra (9.3%), Bihar (7.7%), Andhra Pradesh (6.3%) and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (5.5%). Of the 461 scheduled tribes in India, Orissa has declared 62 tribal communities and 13 as primitive tribal groups (PTG). Dongrias, a major sect of the great Kondh tribe, mostly stay on high hills known as Dongar. The Dongria Kondh is one of the officially designated PTG in Orissa. They are the original inhabitants of Niyamgiri hilly region which extends to Rayagada, Koraput and Kalahandi districts of south Orissa. The Dongria population is confined to three community development blocks namely Bissam Cuttack and Munuguda of Gunpur sub-division and Alyansinghpur Block of Rayagada sub-division. Dongria Kondhs have an estimated population of about 10,000 and are distributed in around 120 settlements, all at an altitude up to 5,000 feet above the sea-level.

They speak a language, called the kuvi, which is of Dravidian linguistic ancestry that has no script. They are patrilineal and patriarchal; they have nuclear families, extended families, lineage and clans. Unlike other tribal groups of India, Dongria Kondhs are known for their deep knowledge and skill in horticulture. They largely rely on hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation in the Niyamgiri hills for survival. However, due to development interventions in education, medical facilities, irrigation, plantation and so on and so forth, they have started adapting to the great tradition or modern civilization standards in many ways. Their traditional life style, customary traits of economy political organization, norms, values and world view have been drastically changed over a long period of time. Their population is around 10000

spread over 120 villages with a sex ratio of 1352 females/ 1000 males. Literacy rate is less than 10%, particularly female literacy in only 3%. Dongria Kondh is an endogamous group and within them the clans are exogamous divided into several patrilineal clans forming socio-cultural territorial organizations. The health status is poor due to high level of poverty, poor environmental sanitation and hygiene, and increased morbidity from water-borne and vector-borne infections. Poor knowledge on availability and access to public health care facilities resulting in increased severity and duration of illnesses. Moreover, social barriers and taboos preventing utilization of healthcare services increase vulnerability to specific endemic and communicable diseases.

A tribe is a group of families bound together by kinship, usually descending from common mythical or legendary ancestors, living in a common region, speaking a common dialect having a common historical background. These groups are the distinct biological isolates with characteristic cultural and socioeconomic background. They inhabit widely varying ecological and geo-climatic setting having at different stages of development. These are considered to be the oldest ethnic segments of population and hence, the term 'Adivasi' has been fairly popular in India. In the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79), Government of India (1984) classified 75 ST communities as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) on the basis of four-point criteria; i) smallness and diminishing population, ii) backwardness and isolation, iii) pre-agricultural technology for their subsistence, and iv) very low level of literacy. They spread over 15 States/ Union Territories with a total population of 1.32 million (1.95%).

Their distribution in different states is shown in Table 1. Each group is small in number, differentially developed with respect to one another of remote habitat with poor administrative and infrastructure back up. Due to isolation they are untouched by modern civilization and thus their traditions have been left intact through the ages. Their problems and needs are quite different from other ST, hence, priority accorded for protection and development. Though they have put into one category, yet each of PTG is at a different level of development and socio-culturally distinct facing survival problems (Pandey, 2002). PTG like Shompens, Jarawas, Sentinelese of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bondos of Orissa, Cholanaickans of Kerala, Abujhmarias of Chhattisgarh and Birhors of Jharkhand are under the threat of getting of extinction. As they live in more interior inaccessible pockets with declining sources of sustenance and become vulnerable to hunger, starvation and ill-health. For the welfare of PTG, 100% subsidy is being provided for individual family benefit and income generation oriented schemes, out of special central assistance by Government of India.

Tribal Scenario of Orissa:

Of all the states, Orissa has the largest number of tribes, as many as 62 existing today contribute 10.38% to the country's tribal population (Fig 1). Total population of the state is 36,804,660 of which the ST is 81, 44,871 forms an impressive 22.13% of the total state population (Census 2001). Almost 44.21 percent of the total land area of the state has been declared constitutionally as Scheduled Area. The tribals mainly inhabit the Eastern Ghat hill range, which runs in the north-south direction (Patro and Panda, 1994). The districts largely dominated by ST are Malkangiri (58.51%), Mayurbhanj (57.87%), Nawarangpur (55.26%), Rayagada (54.99%), Sundargarh (50.74%), Koraput (50.67%), Phulbani (50.13%), Keonjhar (44.62%), Gajapati (47.88%) and Jharsuguda (33.31%). Although many of the tribes are found in other parts of the country, the Juangs, Saoras, Bondas and Bathudis are exclusive to Orissa. These groups range from small communities like Chenchu, Bonda, Juanga, Didayi, to large tribes like Munda, Santals, Kondh, Oraon, Saora and Bhuyan. Linguistically the tribes are broadly classified into four categories (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burmese and Austric). In Orissa, the speakers of the Tibeto-Burmese family are totally absent and hence, belong to three divisions. The Indo-Aryan language family includes Dhelki- Oriya, Matia, Haleba, Jharia, Saunti, Laria and Oriya spoken by Bathudi and the acculturated sections of Bhuiyan, Juang, Kondh, Soura, Raj-Gond. The Austric language family includes eighteen tribal languages (Birija, Parenga, Kisan, Bhumiji, Koda, Mahili Bhumiji, Mirdha- Kharia, Ollar, Gadaba, Juang, Bondo, Didayee, Karmali, Kharia, Munda, Ho, Mundari and Savara). And within the Dravidian language family there are nine languages that include Pengo, Gondi, Kisan, Konda, Koya, Parji, Kui, Kuvi and Kurukh or Oraon. Each group has its own distinct language, culture, religion and social custom. They are grouped into hunter-gatherer-nomads, hunter gatherer and shifting cultivators, artisans, settled agriculturists, industrial and urban unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Primitive Tribal Groups of Orissa:

Out of 75 PTG of the country, Orissa has numerically highest number of 13 PTG (Table 1 and Fig 2). The 25 lakh PTG population constitutes nearly 3.6% of the state's tribal population and 0.3% of the country's population. They live in undulating hilly terrains and dense forests and far from modern amenities (Nityananda, 2005). The ethnic identities are reflected through their dress pattern, housing structure, ornaments, god, goddess and spirits of both benevolent and aevolent nature. Lack of awareness, ignorance, illiteracy and poverty altogether has affected their lives (Bulliyya, 2006). Considering the general features of their eco-system, traditional economy,

supernatural beliefs and practices, and recent impacts of modernization, the PTG are classified into hunting, collecting- gathering, cattle-herders, simple-artisan, hill and shifting cultivation, settled-agriculture, and industrial workers (Jena, 2002). There are 17 Micro-projects covering parts of 20 blocks and 12 districts striving continuously for the all-round development of 13 PTG having population of 59,710. Birhor is only the PTG for whom no separate Micro-project has been established, however, their development is being carried out through the integrated tribal development agency. Since PTG constitute the most vulnerable segments among ST, adequate information is not documented in terms of the progress achieved through developmental programs. Paucity of data on vital aspects makes difficult for prioritize the areas of development and making policy for formulating the PTG road map to be brought on par with the rest of the countrymen in the light of the research into their predicament. The present paper describes the prevailing socio-economic status in highlighting the stressful situations required attention based on field experiences amongst Dongria Kondh PTG from the Niyamgiri hill terrains of Rayagada.

Dongria Kondhs:

The Dongria Kondh (DK) is one of the most ancient tribes mentioned in Hindu myths and classics, notably the Puranas. The name signifies that a primitive community of hill-dwelling (dongar means high hill land) people. The Dongria Kondh call themselves Jharnia meaning those who live by the Jharana (streams) confined to Niyamgiri hill tracts covering the blocks of Kalyansighpur, Bissamcuttack and Muniguda in Rayagada district. Besides Orissa, they are found distributed in Andhra Pradesh. The immediate two neighbours of DK are Kutia and Desia Kondhs. Kutia Kondhs are hill dwellers live of Phulbani and Kalahandi districts while Desia Kondh are plain dwellers. According to Thurston (1909), the number of Kondh sub-groups are fifty-eight, whereas Patnaik (1982) divided into three groups; Kutia Kondh are those who are leading isolated life of poverty and indigence, Dongria Kondh are primitive skilled horticulturists and Desia Kondhs who left their hill habitation and have settled down in the plains. Nayak et al (1990) classified the Kondhs into five sub-groups (Malia, Kutia, Dongria, Kuvi and Desia). They have their own dialect called '*kuvi*', which is of Dravidian linguistic ancestry. Out of seventeen Micro-projects in the state, two Dongria Kondh Development Agency (DKDA) projects have been functioning for their development since 1980s; DKDA-Chattikona (Kurli established in 1978) covers Dongrian villages in Bissamcuttack and Muniguda blocks while DKDA Parsali (1987) looking after Kalyansighpur block. Altogether, there are 120 villages and hamlets and 1813 families with a total population of over 10000 in three blocks. Sex ratio (females per thousand males) measures the balance between males and females in population and imbalances affect the social, economic and community life

in many ways (Desai, 1994). The sex ratio within country is reported to be slightly high among the tribals, it is 1012 and 1002 per 1000 males during 1981 and 1991 respectively (Census of India, 1991). According to 2001 census, the sex ratio found low for the district of Rayagada (1028) and the state (972). The sex ratio of DK stands significantly higher at 1318 and 1352 females per 1000 male population respectively for DKDA areas of Parsali and Chattikona . However, the sex ratio found as low as 920 females per thousand males among the Kutia Kondh PTG of Phulbani district (Basu, 1990).

Habitat:

The Dongria Kondh inhabit exclusively in the forest-clad of Niyamgiri hill ranges stretches from Theruvali of Rayagada district to Lanjigarh of alahandi district located over a high plateau ranging 2000-4970 feet above the sea level. Each Dongria Kondh village is situated in the centre chain of hills of Niamgiris, which are inaccessible, hidden in the folds of mountains majority devoid road and transport facilities (DKDA, 2001; 2004). Their settlements are sparsely distributed on the hilltops and valleys situated in isolation often cut off from the general mass of civilization (Das, 1977). Their settlements are arranged as a cluster of houses in two rows. In each row, the houses are contiguous in a linear fashion and the street is located between rows. Dongria settlements often lack permanency as the entire settlements are abandoned if a number of deaths take place in the same neighbourhood. Many of the Dongria villages have limited number of Domb scheduled caste households confined separately to a corner, who live symbiotically in acting messengers, weaver and cattle herders for the DK (Das, 1984). All Dombs are all landless. Altogether, there are 120 villages and hamlets and 1813 families with a total population of over 10000 in three blocks. Sex ratio (females per thousand males) measures the balance between males and females in population and imbalances affect the social, economic and community life in many ways (Desai, 1994). The sex ratio within country is reported to be slightly high among the tribals, it is 1012 and 1002 per 1000 males during 1981 and 1991 respectively (Census of India, 1991). According to 2001 census, the sex ratio found low for the district of Rayagada (1028) and the state (972). The sex ratio of DK stands significantly higher at 1318 and 1352 females per 1000 male population respectively for DKDA areas of Parsali and Chattikona (Fig 3).

People:

Dongrias consider themselves as the descendents of Niyam Raja, the legendry ancestral king. They are also known to be *Drilli Kuan* or *Dongarian Kuan*, the name derived from a male unique traditional

dignified cloth, wrapped around waist tightly in a manner that two embroidered ends remain hanging, one 4-5 feet in front and the other two feet at the back (Krishan, 1979). Males grow long hair tie into a knot at their nape and always carry an axe on the shoulder and a knife is kept hanging from the waist belt using for offence and defense in the forest. The women wear a lower garment not long enough to hide their knee and cover the chest with a small band of cotton cloth tied at the back. All these garments are woven by neighboring schedule caste community. Their personal adornment is unique with each male and female member using hair clips on their head and often pierces their ears and love to wear as many earrings as they can. . Women are fond of ornaments and beautify themselves traditionally with several hairpins, earrings neck-rings, hand-rings made up of brass, iron and hyndalium prepared by them and purchased from local markets. Body tattooing is practiced by both sexes (Bulliyya et al., 2006).

Religious beliefs:

The Kondh sub-groups once infamous for their pernicious practice of human sacrifice and female infanticide (*Tokri parbo*), which replaced by meriah buffalo sacrifice (*Kondru parbo*) to appease their god/goddess to bring good luck, prosperity and land fertility (Boal 1982). The Dongria have a religion very close to animism. The gods and goddesses are always attributed to various natural phenomena, objects, trees, animals, etc. They have a god or deity for everything and anything. Their life is full of rituals, sacrifices and magico-religious observances throughout the year to their benevolent and malevolent ancestors, aimed at ensuring personal security and happiness, community well-being and group solidarity (Aparajita, 1994).

The theological pantheon is the earth goddess (*Dharani Penu*) at the apex and Niyam penu (Niyamgiri Hill) is believed to be the creator of Dongrias. In addition, a large number of village deities, ancestral cults, household deities and spirits, for instance, in a house, there is a deity for back and front street, kitchen, living room, implements and so on and so forth (Pfeffer, 2005). Breach of any religious conduct by any member of the society invites the wrath of spirits in the form of lack of rain fall, soaking of streams, destruction of forest produce, and other natural calamities. Hence, the customary law, norms, taboos, and values are greatly adhered and enforced with high to heavy unishments, depending up on the seriousness of the crimes committed. For social control in the village and at Muttha level (regional), there are hereditary religious leaders like Jani (religious head), Mondal (secular head), Bejuni (sorcerer), Barik (messenger) who coordinate to hold meetings where the punishment is awarded along with appeasement

procedure is followed with animal sacrifice. The punishment may be in cash or kind and may lead to strict restrictions from the community if not obeyed.

Family and marriage:

DK is an endogamous group and within them the clans are exogamous divided into several patrilineal clans (kunda) forming socio-cultural territorial organizations (mutha). The Dongria family is often nuclear, although extended families exist. Female members are considered assets because of their contribution inside and outside the household and women are equated with the male members in constructing a house to cultivation. Women do all the work for household ranging from fetching water from the distant streams, cooking, serving food to each member of the household to cultivating, harvesting and marketing of produce in the market. Due to this, the bride price is paid to her parents when a girl gets married which is a striking feature of the Dongrias. However, the family is patrilineal and patrilocal. Extended families are either mono- or polygynous (a group consisting of a man and two or more wives and their children or group formed by remarriage of a widow or widower having children by a former marriage), claimed to be social and economic prestige. By custom, marriage must cross clan boundaries (a form of incest taboo). The clan is exogamous, which means marriages are made outside the clan (yet still within the greater Dongoria population). The Census data shows 23.54% of families are polygynous. Woman is treated as an economic asset to the family and for the reason girl child is preferred over boy child (Routray, 1987). Further the prevailing marriage practices go in favor of girls. The parents earn money through bride price that is given by the groom's parent as part of the marriage deal. Girls fetch high bride price to their parents where as boy's parents have to pay bride price to get them married. The girl's dormitory (*adasbeta*) is common practice for village exogamy (Patnaik and Mohanty, 2002). The girls sleep at night in the dormitory (Daa Sala) and learn social taboos, myths, legends, stories, riddles, proverbs amidst singing and dancing the whole night, thus learning everything that is expected from a potential wife and mother. As regards the acquisition of brides for marriage is the most widely prevalent practice through capture, in addition to other practices such as negotiations, elopement, purchase and services. With the passage of time negotiated type of marriage, which is considered prestigious, is being preferred more and payment of bride price is an inseparable part of marriage.

Economy:

Orissa accounts for the largest area under shifting (*Podu*) cultivation in India, which an age-old practice being practiced in Eastern Ghats. About 5298 km² area is under podu cultivation and depend 1.5 lakh families of PTG annually (Dongaria Kondha, Kutia Kind, Lanjia Sara, Paraja, Godaba, Koya, Didayi,

Bonda, and Paudi Bhuyan). They are called Dongria or dweller of “donger”(hill in Oriya) and love to settle in higher altitudes due to their economic demands. Their economies center round the dongar hill slopes for shifting cultivation, the abode of their deities and supernatural beings that provides them also with a metaphor for their worldview (Patro and Panda, 1994). Shifting cultivation or Podu Chasa as it is locally called, as part of an economic need retaining the most ancient system of agriculture dating back to the lower Neolithic period and primitive features of underdevelopment and cultural evolution. It is also known as field forest rotation or slash and burn agriculture. It is characterized as subsistence oriented based mainly on collection of minor forest produce, hunting and, or a combination of hunting and collecting. The axe is the most important instrument for them and is used for multiple purposes including offence and defence and use of bows and arrows is still practice. The DK extensively practice the slash and burn (swidden) type of rotation cultivation. The hill slopes are clearly marked by areas under swidden cultivation. Plenty of jackfruits, orange and mango trees grow in the hills. They are also able horticulturists along hill slopes and grow pineapple, banana, sago-pam (salap), citrus fruits, guava, papaya etc. Besides horticulture, they earn their livelihood through forests and animal husbandry (Sahoo, 1992). Rice, maize, ganja and ragi are main crop, besides various types of pulses (red gram and black gram), and oil seeds (kandul, masur, mung, chana, alsi (naizer), castor, mustard). The fruits of jamu, harida, bahada, amla, mahua, kusuma, kendu are of economic importance. Gathering of forest produce like siali creepers, kendu leaf, sal leaf, seeds of karanja (*Pongnamia glatera*) and mahua (*Madhuaka latifolia*) is made for daily domestic requirements (Dash et al., 2008). They raise livestock like goats, pigs and hens for meeting the demands of prostrations and for their own use on ritual occasions.

Indebtedness:

The DK in Niyamgiri area are at the level of indebtedness due to their poverty, disbeliefs and illiteracy. Often remain in debt to moneylenders in perpetuity that carried down to their descendants (Patnaik, 1988). Their principal source of debt is the mainland moneylenders (*kumuties*) and neighbourhood Dombs. Dongrias drink liquor very often prepared from mahua, sago palm juice and date palm juice. Their drinking habits, gifts and counter gifts and scarcity of food during lean periods compel to become indebted. They need money for payments of bride price, expensive marriage feasts, rituals, and magico-religious performances (Schnepel, 2001). Inter-clan feuds relating to property, hunting and marriage are impediment to the economic prosperity. The loan (*rina*) is taken either in cash or kind and the rate of interest (*Adi or Kantari*) is generally usurious (Arati and Sahoo 2004). With the development of horticultural orchards, there is a phenomenal increase of fruit production and spices (turmeric and ginger). However, the Dombs exploit them as the monopolizing trading community in taking the advantages of

the symbiotic relationship. Because of high interest charged, they are unable to free themselves from debt and mortgage their plantations and orchids (Aparajita, 1994). In spite of debt legislation, the fraudulent and evasive practice of unscrupulous money lending business continues that has hampering the effectiveness of the government and statutory credit agencies (Behera and Misra, 2005).

Food Practice:

Rayagada district is infamously known as the hunger pocket of Orissa. During 2001, the Kashipur block was under intense media, political and administrative attention for starvation deaths. The districts is inhabited by the hill tribes, nearly 90% of the population depends on agriculture but the land area is only 16%, mostly with poor soil base and a large part faces drought with a wide seasonal variation in food consumption mainly in quality and quantity DK face acute shortage of food in the post-sowing monsoon period (July-September) and again around March when the *kharif* harvest has been exhausted. In such situations, consumption of mango kernels is the usual practice to compensate the staple food shortage. It is being used after a series of cleaning procedures to get rid of toxicity, which is added to the mandia preparation in place of rice. They were also taking local alternative non-food varieties like leaves, mushrooms, tamarind seed powder that contribute as rainy foods since generations as coping measures of food insecurity. Moreover, the powder from the pith of sago palm is being used commonly. In the past, they were able to cover most of the shortfall with foods gathered from the forests. Forest degradation and curtailed forest access has reduced the availability of natural foods on which they depended compelling to depend more on purchased foods to meet their minimum survival needs (Naik, 1989). Many households have become caught in a debt trap because of the precariousness of food security. This is the period Dongrias do most backbreaking labour in their dongar fields. Combination of half starvation and hard labour take heavy toll on their health.

Nutritional status:

Malnutrition is fairly common amongst the PTG, especially young children and women debilitating their physical condition and lowering resistance to disease, leading at times even to behavioural impairment (Rao et al., 1998). Dietary habits are the practiced as per the subsistence accessibility. In general, rice and millets formed the bulk of dietaries of the DK. Mandia gruel made out of boiling ragi powder and rice formed the main constituent of food and source of energy in the breakfast and lunch with or without a green chilli or dry fish. They take full meal of rice with a curry during night, however, a wide variation observed in day-to-day food intake both in terms of quality and quantity. The household intakes of pulses, vegetables, fats/oils and sugar/jaggery are grossly deficient. Consumption of milk and milk products is

taboo and they believe that milching the cow make suffer to the calf that in turn may lead to ill health of their children. The proportion of DK households consuming adequate amounts of both protein and calorie (P+ C+) accounted only 12%, while about 60% are consuming inadequate amounts of both protein and calorie (P- C-). The proportion of households consuming adequate protein but inadequate calorie (C- P+) is 11%, and inadequate protein but adequate calorie (C+ P-) is 17% indicating widespread protein inadequacy than calorie inadequacy. The nutritional status of preschool children (0- 5y) assessed according to weight-for-age (underweight), height-for-age (stunting) and weight-for-height (wasting) using standard classification. The proportion of children with underweight, stunting and wasting (<median-2SD) is 66%, 63% and 21% respectively indicating growth retardation. Body weight of children (6-10y) and adolescents (11-19y) show that 60-80% are malnourished (<85% NCHS standard). Low body-mass index (BMI<18.5 kg/m²) reflected in 55% of adults as chronic energy deficiency. The proportion of over-weight (BMI> 25.0 kg/m²) is negligible. Micronutrient malnutrition particularly iron and iodine deficiencies are of public health significance in the DK (Sahu et al., 2005). Anaemia is widespread problem among preschool children, school age children, adolescents, pregnant women and lactating mothers. Iron deficiency in terms of low ferritin levels is the contributing factor for anaemia. Iodine deficiency disorders are endemic in the Niyamgiri region. Goitre rate is 21% in children, and their intake of iodine deficiency reflected in terms of low urinary iodine excretion. Nearly 10% of households using salt having adequately iodine content of >15 ppm (Bulliyya et al., 2008). As most tribal women suffer from anaemia which lowers resistance to fatigue, affects their working capacity and increases susceptibility to disease particularly for those having closely spaced frequent pregnancies (Khan, 1993). The nutritional status of tribal women directly influences their reproductive performances and the birth weight of their children, which is crucial to the infant's chances of survival, growth and development (Rasmussen, 2001).

Conclusion:

The socioeconomic and environmental milieu, in which the DK PTG located direct their precarious existence with lack of opportunity for improvement leading to food security and impairments of physical growth and development. Social isolation, poor communication, low literacy, exploitation and inadequate resources are the main concerns that need to be improved on priority basis. Knowledge on healthcare facilities, ongoing national health and nutritional programs and their optimum utilization should be promoted with measures for controlling

Communicable diseases and nutritional deficiencies. A multi-pronged intervention approach for sustainable livelihood coupled to improve their literacy levels leading to economic and social empowerment. There is an urgent need and the dire of the area for which they face continuous threats of eviction from their homes and lands. The existing infrastructure and welfare schemes are to be reinforced without compromise with targeted surveillance goals. To save the PTG, preparation of action plan for their survival, protection and development is required urgently for fulfilling basic needs and socioeconomic update to meet the challenges of modernization.

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