

# Social Marginalisation and Poverty in Rural Sri Lanka

*This paper examines certain non-economic parameters of rural poverty in Sri Lanka. By "non economic aspects of rural poverty" I mean those aspects of rural poverty that cannot be fully explained by standard or conventional economic analysis increasingly guided by neo-liberal orthodoxy highlighting the central and positive role of market forces in economic development and social progress, inclusive of poverty reduction. While by no means de-emphasising the role of the market, this paper focuses on certain social processes that contribute to perpetuation of poverty in some specific population groups and community settings. It is argued here that understanding the relevant social processes can not only help us better understand the causes of rural poverty but also identify more effective ways of reducing rural poverty.*

It is generally known that poverty in Sri Lanka is primarily a rural problem (GOSL 2002, World Bank 1995, 2002). According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 1995/96, the incidence of poverty is highest in the rural sector (27%), followed by the estate sector (25%) and urban sector (15%). More than 90% of all poor in Sri Lanka are concentrated in rural or estate areas. As stated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy of the Government of Sri Lanka, the benefits of recent economic growth in the country have been largely confined to the more urbanized Western Province (GOSL 2002). In explaining widespread rural poverty most research has focused on the sluggishness of the rural economy (Gunatilleke et al 1993, World Bank 1996, Silva et al 1999). While not denying the importance of economic processes, it is also important to examine related social processes occurring in rural society in order to fully understand the nature and extent of rural poverty in Sri Lanka.

Against this background the questions addressed in this essay include the following:

1. To what extent and why is there a higher concentration of poverty in certain types of rural communities?
2. To what extent and in what ways does the lifestyle of the poor play a role in perpetuation of their condition?
3. How far and due to what reasons do the rural poor depend excessively on subsidies handed out by the state and other actors, including non-governmental organisations?
4. Why is it that there is widespread

unemployment and underemployment and at the same time considerable labour shortages in certain sectors of the rural economy?

5. What are some possible remedies for addressing the social aspects of rural poverty discussed in this essay?

Social marginalisation is a process whereby certain groups in society are fully or partially excluded from mainstream society because of factors such as identity, status, lifestyle and affiliations. This paper uses this concept in a rather loose manner to describe social processes that contribute to escalation of rural poverty. The current paper synthesises the findings of several qualitative and quantitative sociological investigations of rural poverty in Sri Lanka, including the author's own

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### Socio-cultural Marginalisation and Community Dimensions of Poverty

Research in Sri Lanka points to several types of communities which are marginalised and held in distance by mainstream society on the basis of their socio-cultural identity, neighborhood characteristics and life style (Silva and Athukorala 1991, Siva 1992, Silva 1998, Parker and Silva 2000, Silva, Weeratunga & Ibarquen 2002). They include urban low-income communities of slum and shanty types referred to as "wattas", village expansion colonies disparagingly referred to as "colony" or "koriyawa", squatter settlements in marginal farming systems, fishing communities in the coastal belt, irrigation settlements especially in frontier areas of the dry zone, welfare centres and relocated communities in conflict-affected areas, plantation enclaves and so-called "depressed communities" characterised by hereditary low social status. All these communities are, to some extent, socially and sometimes spatially cut off from surrounding populations and in many of them poverty and social marginalisation go hand in hand. Often they encounter difficulties in joining mainstream society.

Here we concentrate on certain relevant rural social formations.

Village Expansion Colonies have been established under the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 in order to settle landless poor from villages especially in the wet zone. Moore and Perera (1978) who were the first to highlight the marginalised nature of these rural communities estimated that nearly 25% of all households in Sri Lanka lived in these rural enclaves. They reported -

Colonists thus tend to come from a category at the bottom of the economic ladder. They often share social characteristics which tend to mark them off from the bulk of the villagers. Many are of low caste....Grama Sevaka use the opportunity to remove troublesome villagers, i.e. drunkards or thieves, from their doorsteps by allocating them land. The land which is distributed is almost always poor and often very hilly....The colonies thus tend to be located in interior areas with poor roads and limited access to such services as shops, schools, buses and electricity (1978: 43).

These settlements often brought together into one concentration the rural poor households dispersed in nearby communities. The study by Moore and Perera also found that the relationship between colonists and neighboring villages is often characterised by conflict, with the latter treating the former as consisting mainly of criminal and anti-social elements and rejects. In view of the explosive combination of material hardship and social marginalisation the authors found these communities a potential breeding ground of insurgents.

Of the other marginal rural communities, squatter settlements in marginal farming systems are found mainly in remote dry zone areas in Monaragala, Hambantota and Kurunagala Districts (Woost 1990). They as well as frontier irrigation settlements are characterised by environmental hazards, physical isolation, poor access to services and absence of strong community organizations (De Soyza 1995). They are compounded by lack of clear title to land, fragmentation of land holdings, second and third generation problems and alcoholism and related problems like domestic violence. In some communities illegal operations such as brewing of illicit liquor, growing of cannabis and illicit felling of timber also present serious problems.

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The fishing communities are characterised by seasonal unemployment, identification with an occupation that commands less respect from the society at large, violence and other behavior patterns that not only create problems within these communities but also bring them in conflict with the larger society, including law enforcement agencies. The migratory character of certain groups of fishermen and some aspects of their ethno-religious background also add to their social marginality (Silva et al 2002).

Estimates of the total number of internally displaced people affected by nearly 20 years of war in Sri Lanka ranged from 600,000 to 1.5 million as of 2001 (GOSL 2002). They encounter special difficulties due to a combination of factors, including ethnic identity, restrictions on mobility imposed by the security forces or the LTTE, loss of life or injury due to the war, lack of identity documents, repeated displacements, loss of assets and livelihoods, disruption of family life and in some instances outright hostility from surrounding communities (Silva 2003).

Estates can be seen as ethnic enclaves essentially restricted to employment opportunities available in the estates, poor housing and sanitation, and poor quality of health and education facilities (CARE 1998). The key problems faced by estate youth in accessing outside employment includes lack of marketable skills, language difficulties, lack of contact with those outside the estate, absence of identity cards and birth certificates and other such constraints.

Caste systems in Sri Lanka (Sinhalese, Indian Tamil and Jaffna Tamil) have been described as relatively mild compared to the caste systems in India. The absence of a rigid notion of untouchability and corresponding forms of social outcasting can be seen as a progressive element in Sri Lankan society. However, "depressed caste communities" do exist in parts of Sri Lanka. Besides their inherited disadvantage, lower prestige, and minority status vis-a-vis more dominant caste groups with whom they interact, often they have limited property ownership in part as a cumulative effect of being share tenants and bonded servants of high caste land-owning families (Silva 1992). Even though younger generations in these communities are more educated than the older generations, their ability to take advantage of educational and public sector employment opportunities have been restricted due to their marginal position in society, discrimination in schools and lack of political power. Youth from these communities have been attracted to radical underground political movements partly due to their own experiences of injustice, discrimination and lack of social dignity (Jiggins 1979).

The nature and extent of poverty in these communities cannot be understood in purely economic terms. Groups such as fishermen, plantation workers and middle-east returnees may not be always disadvantaged in terms of income or earning capacity (Silva 1998). The programmes that merely target rural households and try to pull them out of poverty through income support often fail to address the community dimensions of poverty in many rural settings. Their poor



Resource poor rural communities still operate as family labour units

economic situation is often accompanied by social marginalisation, often accompanied by social marginalisation, geographical isolation, powerlessness and inability to access resources controlled by various agencies including the state, NGOs and the private sector. These communities have chronic and multiple disadvantages in housing and infrastructure, health, education and services, making it difficult for individual households to escape poverty on their own. Tied relations with non-institutional money lenders and traders, inability to access institutional credit and inability to utilize market mechanisms giving better terms of trade can be also seen as further aspects of social marginalisation affecting these communities (Silva et al 1999).

The efforts to mainstream some of these communities on the part of the state have typically taken the form of programmes for raising their income levels typically accompanied by social mobilisation (Gunatilaka 1997 Silva, de Silva and Kottegoda 2002). Similarly, the rural housing programme under the Gam Udava Movement paid special attention to some depressed low caste communities as well as village expansion colonies. The available research evidence regarding the impact of these projects is scanty but it does appear that such projects where successfully implemented did have the effect of empowering the socially marginal in some of these communities (Wignaraja & Siriwardana 1998). More research is necessary

in order to fully understand the mainstreaming impact of such politically-motivated projects.

Several of the new employment opportunities opened up under liberalisation policies probably had a significant impact on some of these marginal communities. Of these employment opportunities under the 200 Garment Factory Program and employment opportunities in the middle-east and other overseas countries appear to have played a significant role in many of these communities. The available data indicate that women from urban low-income communities, depressed low-caste communities, colonies and estates have joined migration to the middle-east in large numbers (Marga Institute 1996). While both positive and negative impact of middle-east migration must be carefully assessed, this is an important finding that indicates that marginalised groups are perhaps increasingly being affected by economic liberalisation and globalisation processes. How far these processes help them overcome their marginalised position or subject them to new forms of marginalisation must be examined through carefully designed future research.

#### Rural Poverty: a Result of Inadequate Income or Inappropriate Consumption Patterns?

We know that the poor are often victims of circumstance but this image is not so helpful when it comes to the issue of understanding how their own behavior may at least partially contribute to perpetuation of their poverty. This in turn makes it necessary to take a closer look at the life style of the poor. While it would be wrong to "blame the victims" or "morally condemn" particular lifestyles, it is important to realize that improving income is not sufficient to bring down poverty levels in some instances. In the analysis pursued here lifestyle issues that have a potential bearing on poverty are raised with a focus on the impact of substance (alcohol, drugs and tobacco) abuse practices on living standards of selected population groups.

We review here some of the available data relating to consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances in order to determine its potential impact on poverty.

In assessing its impact on poverty alcohol and substance abuse must be approached from several angles. They include diversion of scarce funds away from basic needs of women, children and other family members, health consequences of addictive behaviors, impact on labour productivity, impact on domestic violence and crime, impact on social

marginalisation and life in general. On the other hand, economic significance of alcohol and tobacco industries in generating employment cannot be disregarded.

Macro-level data relating to consumption of licensed alcohol reveal that per capita alcohol consumption in Sri Lanka steadily increased from 1989 to 2001 (see Silva and Bulankulame 2003). This in turn may be seen as an outcome of multiple factors, including aggressive promotion of alcohol by multinational companies, increased availability through recent expansion of licensed outlets, which in turn may be partly attributable to issuing of liquor licences through the party political machines, increased purchasing power of the population at large and increased emotional and social stress also reflected in a variety of other ways. It must be noted here that the published data on alcohol consumption excludes illicit alcohol widely consumed by the poor in rural, estate and urban areas. According to one estimate, nearly 90% of liquor consumption in certain dry zone districts is illicit brews (SOBER 1997: 28). In conformity with trends of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related morbidity and mortality in Sri Lanka also reveal a corresponding increase since 1980s (Silva and Bulankulame 2003). Another notable feature is that alcohol and drug related convictions have rapidly increased in recent years so much so that nearly 60% of annual admissions to prisons in Sri Lanka are due to alcohol and drug-related violations under the Excise Ordinance. Many of these prisoners, who keep returning to the prisons having being reconvicted, typically come from marginalised and impoverished social backgrounds (Personal communication, Mr. P.V.M. Senaratne, Community Correction Programme of the Ministry of Justice).

<b>Expenditure on Alcohol and Tobacco as a % of Total per Capita Expenditure by Sector</b>	
<b>Sector</b>	<b>% of Total per Capita Expenditure</b>
Urban	2.4
Rural	4.1
Estate	8.5
All Island	3.8

Source: HIES 1990/91

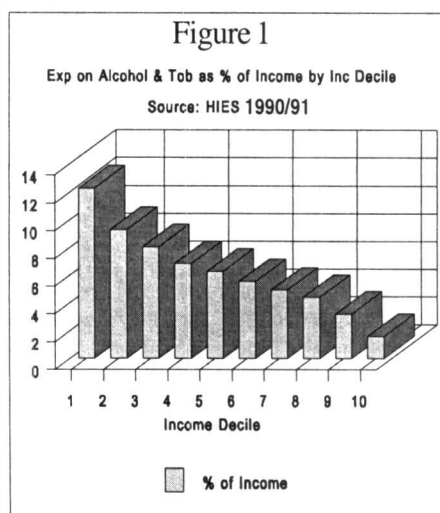
According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of 1990/91 conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics, expenditure on alcohol and tobacco

as a % of total per capita expenditure was 3.8% for the population in general. It varied from 2.4% in the urban sector to 4.1% in the rural sector and a high of 8.5% in the estate sector. Comparison of expenditure on alcohol and tobacco among various income deciles indicate that the percentage of income spent on substance abuse tends to be higher in lower income deciles, with the lowest income decile reporting 12.25% of income diverting to substance use as compared to 1.6 for the highest income decile (see Figure 1). On the whole these data suggest that the constraints to household budgets arising from alcohol, tobacco and drug dependencies may be much greater in low-income households. A substantial share of limited incomes of such households appears to be diverted to maintaining addictive behaviors of one or more adult male household members (usually male head of the household).



Poverty-related impacts of alcoholism and other addictive behaviours may be more varied and at the same time more devastating in selected population groups in rural society, such as the marginalised groups discussed in the previous section.

Various micro studies indicate that the prevalence of substance abuse in low-income households in selected population groups may be substantially high. A survey conducted in Hambantota by



SOBER, an anti-alcohol NGO, found that 60% of families supported by the Janasakti programme had at least one member addicted to smoking or alcohol, illicit liquor (*kasippu*) being widely consumed in the rural hinterland (Gunasekera & Perera 1997). A study covering 6 districts found that male prevalence rate was considerably higher in the dry zone districts of Monaragala (66%), Hambantota (55%) and Polonnaruwa (55%) (ADDIC 1995b). In a representative sample of 2445 households in Mahaweli System H contacted in a study conducted by the NDDCB, some 37% had at least one regular consumer of alcohol (quoted in De Soyza 1995). In an intensive ethnographic study of one settlement unit in Mahaweli System H, de Soyza reported

The rough climatic conditions and physical terrain, economic strife, depression and sheer boredom have meant that with closure of the frontier poor male settlers are prone to temporarily escape their misfortune by turning to drink (1995:346).

Hettige (1993) found a similar pattern among new settlers in irrigations schemes.

In many rural communities illicit brewing of alcohol is done by powerful anti-social elements often having strong connections to politicians and the police. Alcohol is also closely associated with domestic violence, incest, homicide, suicide and gang rivalries (Silva and Bulankulame 2003). Alcohol abuse and related problems often constitute an important factor that contributes to the negative stereotypes that characterise the attitudes of those who interact with these communities from outside.

In the estate sector, where alcohol has become a serious problem among the workers, prevalence of alcohol use was found to be 65% among adult males and 42% among adult females (ADDIC 1995a). Focus group discussion conducted by a team of researchers in six estates covering upcountry, mid country and low country revealed that the expenditure on alcohol in the estates may be much higher than those reported in the 1990-91 HIES. According to this study the number of regular (daily or at least weekly) consumers of alcohol ranged from 50 to 75% for working men and 10 to 20 percent for working women (CARE 1998). Daily income spent on alcohol was estimated to be 25 to 50 percent of the income of average working men, alcohol consumption being part of the daily routine of many male estate labourers. The number of alcohol shops in close proximity to the estates had increased substantially since 1990s. In some estates alcohol was a primary motivation for adult males

to earn an extra income from estate or off-estate work. As a result, living conditions remained unchanged in spite of improved income attributed to incentive payments and opening up of off-estate employment opportunities. Alcohol was perceived by estate workers as a coping strategy and a means to season their bodies and mind to the physically demanding work schedule more strictly enforced by the new management companies in the estates. In the FGDs the estate residents also mentioned that alcohol help them forget their daily share of worries and deplorable living conditions associated with the labour lines. The cold and damp conditions in upcountry estates were also mentioned as a factor conducive to regular alcohol use. The women were routinely given a dose of alcohol after child delivery, extending the notion of alcohol as a remedy for all kind of body pains, including 'labour pains'.

Among the negative effects of alcohol were drain on household income, diversion of funds from basic needs, absenteeism of workers, worker indiscipline, indebtedness, domestic violence, adverse health effects such as ulcers in the bowels and cerrohsis and problems with police and supervisory staff. While there was a generally positive view about alcohol within the estate communities, it added to the social marginalisation of estate communities on the part of management, law enforcement agencies and the like.

While widespread substance abuse in marginalised population groups may be seen as a symptom of deeper issues and merely a manifestation of their disadvantaged position in society as also evident in marginalised groups around the world such as African American communities in the US and aboriginal populations in Australia, it also indicates that efforts to increase the income of such groups without changing the current consumption behavior may be ineffective or even counter productive.

### Dependency Syndrome

The dependency syndrome signifies both an excessive reliance on external support for day-to-day survival and a welfare mentality in which too much is expected from the state and/or other agencies without bearing or sharing in the costs involved. To the extent people are both materially and mentally dependent on external agents for their survival it stifles private drive and initiative and hampers their capacity to take advantage of opportunities within a competitive market framework. The resulting subjective orientation is typically associated with a widespread perception of the state as an essentially benevolent agency which should not impose any burdens on the citizens in

general and the poor in particular. Ralph Pieris who was one of the earliest to examine the dependency problem as a developmental problem in Sri Lanka referred to an "an over-generous government distributing welfare services to the masses from whom nothing is expected in return.... Policies to redress this imbalance, to harden a soft state, are resisted by a pampered electorate" (1977: 24-25). Thus the dependency syndrome among the poor can be seen as an outcome of decades of paternalistic welfare policies driven by patronage politics where short-term political gains of placating the electorate have taken precedence over achieving long-term developmental objectives.

To the extent the dependency syndrome may be seen as a negative outcome of decades of welfare-oriented patronage politics, one could expect it to be less pronounced among the politically marginal segments of the population and more pronounced among those in mainstream society. Those who have access to state patronage are more likely to rely on the state to the maximum possible extent and less inclined to turn to a path of self-reliance. On the other hand, those who are excluded from state patronage may turn to other agencies such as private sector or NGOs and develop a dependency relationship *vis-a-vis* such agencies unless necessary precautions are taken to prevent such tendencies on the part of the relevant agencies. The primary focus of the current essay is on rural people's dependency on the state as it has a direct bearing on effectiveness of poverty alleviation programmes conducted by the state.

The relationship between poverty and dependency is a complex one. The way dependency syndrome impacts on perpetuation of poverty in Sri Lanka have been approached from a number of perspectives. First, the extent to which the poor and non-poor are dependent on subsidies of one kind or another and its impact on their incentives for work (Dunham and Edwards 1997). If there is any evidence that subsidies serve as a disincentive for work, it may result in perpetuation of poverty. Second, the extent to which various interventions by the state and NGOs have created a dependency situation where activities initiated by external agencies gradually wears away once external assistance comes to a halt or external support gets extended more or less indefinitely beyond the stipulated date of termination of the programmes because of continued pressures from various parties (Moore 1995, Woost 1990). Third, development of an effective institutional credit programme addressing the needs of small producers and micro-entrepreneurs have been hampered by politically-motivated interferences in the credit market and the related problems of developing a credit culture among the poor (Jayamaha 1990, Gunatilaka 1997). Fourth, politicization of grassroots level institutions and their tendency to become dependency structures manipulated by a handful of self-seeking individuals

rather than institutions representing the interests of the poor in general (Gunatilaka 1996, Silva *et al* 1996).

### Voluntary Unemployment and Labour Shortages in Agriculture

The labour market in Sri Lanka presents several paradoxes that have a bearing on the search for a growth-oriented approach to poverty alleviation. The simultaneous presence of voluntary unemployment and labour shortages in selected economic activities has been identified as a key constraint. Labour shortages for rubber tapping, coconut plucking and tea plucking have been reported in certain plantations particularly in the low country as well as in the small holder sector (Plantation Reform Project 1996, CARE 1998). On the other hand, reported stagnation in the non-plantation agriculture has been partially attributed to labour constraints including youth unwillingness to take up agriculture (Jayasena 1998, Silva *et al* 1999) and the lack of diversification from paddy to high value crops, which in turn has been attributed to the lower and less regimented demand for labour in paddy cultivation making it possible to combine it with off-farm employment (World Bank 1996, Dunham and Edwards 1997). The coexistence of high poverty levels and high wage levels in the rural sector has also been identified as something that needs to be explained (World Bank 1996, Dunham and Edwards 1997). More detailed qualitative and quantitative research is needed in order to answer these questions satisfactorily.

Here certain tentative suggestions are made on the basis of literature review and some preliminary field visits.

1. The low social status accorded to these occupations is a key factor in the prevailing youth attitudes towards such employment (Jayasena 1998). In addition to poor working conditions typically associated with these employment, type of technology used, non-participatory management style adopted in the plantation sector, occupational hazards (e.g falling of coconut trees) and irregularity of employment (e.g. both in rubber tapping and coconut plucking work is stopped on rainy days). The coconut pluckers who are available wish to work in areas other than their home areas in order to make sure that their families and children in particular are not affected by the demeaning status assigned to this occupation. On the other hand, the educated rural youth helped by their parents prefer to remain unemployed instead of working the land due to status considerations, preoccupation with salaried employment, low income earning potential in farming and concern about physical attractiveness and marriageability especially in the case of girls.

2. There are also certain constraints regarding free mobility of labour between rural and estate sectors and between regions due to physical isolation, social marginalization and prevailing security situation in the country. For instance, estate youth in particular find it difficult to access employment outside the estates in the current security environment aggravated by the non-availability of national identity cards for many of them (CARE 1998).

3. The disincentive effect of transfer programs and subsidies may be an additional factor in the rural sector ( Sahn and Alderman 1996). Also the reservation wages in the rural sector may be high due to the impact of transfers and remittances (Dunham and Edwards 1997).

4. The skills needed in these occupations cannot be quickly acquired. On the other hand, there are no vocational training programs to disseminate these skills.

5. With expansion of educational opportunities, the type of people who were prepared to take up relevant employment may be decreasing in number in the labour force. On the other hand, continued social marginalisation of people engaged in these occupations discourages youth from taking them up even if they bring in relatively high incomes.

## Conclusion

The social marginalisation of selected rural communities reviewed in this essay can be seen as a cumulative and combined outcome of impositions from the society at large and responses and certain maladaptations on the part of people in the relevant communities. Lack of basic infrastructural facilities in communities such as village expansion colonies and squatter settlements and inability of such communities to access resources channeled from outside can be partly attributed to discriminatory practices of those outside these communities. The way the members of these communities are often penalised under the Excise Ordinance designed to regulate alcohol and drug-related abuses can be seen as a clear instance where this instrument has been transformed from "a tool in the struggle against poverty" to "a weapon in the war against the poor" (Bordieu 1999: 176). War-related internal displacement also underlines the manner in which processes occurring at the society at large contribute to social marginalisation processes.

It is, however, wrong to see the affected populations as mere victims of circumstances who have no agency or complicity at all in the relevant social processes. Widespread substance abuse in such communities,

manifestations of a dependency syndrome as well as patterns of voluntary unemployment in certain circumstances highlight the fact that certain practices deeply entrenched in the relevant communities often serve to perpetuate their condition and make it difficult for them and the younger generations in these communities to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion. While we should be cautious not to fall into the trap of blaming the victim in poverty research, at the same time we should not fail to recognize the agency of the poor where it does exist.

In terms of social policy options two parallel approaches may be necessary in order to deal with social marginalisation processes. At the level of the society at large policies of universal coverage, strengthening of human rights and appropriate legal reforms in general are necessary in order to minimize the disadvantages of the poor and the marginalised. It is important to point out here that income transfer at the household level, the primary strategy pursued by many nationwide programmes such as the Samurdhi Programme may not be the most effective strategy to deal with problems of social marginalisation and social exclusion examined in this essay. On the other hand, participatory approaches can best serve to raise the awareness of the marginalised communities about the manner in which they can potentially overcome their disadvantages and better participation in mainstream society. Social mobilisation efforts must aim at not only highlighting the role of various intermediaries in depriving them of full benefits of their production activities, but also exploring and eventually overcoming their own complicity in the marginalisation and impoverishment processes (Silva, de Silva and Kottegoda 2002). In any case it is increasingly evident from development practices throughout the world that the poor can do certain things to improve their own condition through their private and collective efforts and gradually overcome the larger structures that all too often disempower and marginalise them.

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