



Assignment on

# **History and Lifestyle of The Chakma in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh Studies  
GEN 201

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## **Abstract**

The Chakmas are one of the largest ethnic groups in Bangladesh. They are living in the hill tracts of Chittagong, especially in Rangamati and Khagrachori for several hundred years. Among the other ethnic groups, the Chakmas hold a prestigious place as they have a quite impressive culture , pattern of life and contribution to Bangladesh. They have their own standard language. They also have an attractive culture adorned with different colorful activities. But it is a matter of great regret that, due to the invasion of the land grabbers, regional anarchy and for the assault of the military of Bangladesh, they are leading a dire life now days. Their authentic cultures are also getting diluted with the mainstream culture. However, due to the peace accord and different steps undertaken by Government of Bangladesh the Chakama people are now getting supports to live peacefully.

## **1. Introduction**

There is hardly any country in the world having only one major group and no other ethnic groups. Bangladesh is not different from them. Bangladesh's tribal population consists of about 1 million people, just under 1 percent of the total population. They live primarily in the Chittagong Hills and in the regions of Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Rajshahi. The majority of the tribal population (778,425) live in rural area.. Among them many practice shifting cultivation. Most tribal people are of SinoTibetan descent and has distinctive Mongoloid features. They differ in their social organization, marriage customs, birth and death rites, food, and other social customs from the people of the rest of the country. They speak Tibeto-Burman languages. In the mid-1980s, the percentage distribution of tribal population by religion was Hindu 24, Buddhist 44, Christian 13, and others 19.

Among the tribal people, one of the largest is the Chakma. By far the largest tribe, the Chakmas are of mixed origin but reflect more Bengali influence than any other tribe. Unlike the other tribes, the Chakmas and Marmas generally live in the highland valleys. Most Chakmas are Buddhists, but some practiced Hinduism or animism. They have their own culture, language and way of life.

## **2. Who are Chakma?**

The Chakmas are the largest ethnic group of Bangladesh. They also call themselves Changmas. They are concentrated in the central and northern parts of the chittagong hill tracts where they live amidst several other ethnic groups. Exact population figures are lacking but the most reliable estimates put their number at 140,000 in 1956 and 230,000 in 1981. According to the 1991 population census,

there were about 253,000 Chakmas. More than 90 percent of them are concentrated in Rangamati and Khagrachhari districts. About 100,000 Chakmas also live in India, particularly in the states of Arunachal, Mizoram and Tripura. Small groups have settled in other countries as well. A tribal group called “Tangchangya” is also considered to be a branch of the Chakma people. Both tribes speak the same language, have the same customs and culture, and profess the same religion, Theravada Buddhism.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **3. History and Origin**

#### **3.1 Medieval period**

Ethnically, the Chakmas are Tibeto-Burman, and are thus closely related to tribes in the foothills of the Himalayas. Their ancestors came from the Magadha Kingdom (now Bihar, India) to settle in Arakan and most of them later moved to Bangladesh, settling in the Cox's Bazar District, the Korpos Mohol area, and areas of the present Mizoram. The Chakmas were historically the rulers of Chittagong Hill Tracts under the control of a king. Today, however, the power of the Chakma king, Raja Debashish Roy, is merely symbolic.

Diego de Astor, a Portuguese, drew a map of Bengal, which was published as *Descrição do Reino de Bengalla* in the book *Quarta decada da Asia* (Fourth decade of Asia) by João de Barros in 1615. The map shows a place called "Chacomias" on the eastern bank of the river Karnaphuli, suggesting that this is where the Chakmas used to live at that time. The Arakan king Meng Rajagri Salim Shah (1593-1612) conquered this land, and in a 1607 letter to

a Portuguese merchant, Philip de Brito Nicote addressed himself as the highest and most powerful king of Arakan, of Chacommas and of Bengal.

### **3.2 The East India Company Period**

Three years after the Battle of Palasi, Mir Qasim the new Nawab of Murshidabad rewarded the British East India Company with Chittagong, Burdwan and Midnapur. On 5 January 1761 the company representative Harry Verlest took over charges of Chittagong from Subedar Mohammad Reza Khan. But the Chakma king Sher Doulat Khan who was practically independent through nominally paid tribute to the Mughals, didn't accept the hegemony of the Company and their demand of taxes at enhanced rate. A protracted war started and it continued up to 1787. The East India Company launched four offensives against the Chakmas in 1770, 1780, 1782 and 1785. In 1785 the Company started peace negotiations with the then Chakma king Jan Baksh Khan, son of Sher Doulat Khan. Later in 1787 the king accepted the sovereignty of the Company and agreed to pay 500 maunds of cotton annually. The peace agreement or treaty was signed at Kolkata.

### **3.3 The British Government Period**

After the war with the English, the Chakmas became very weak militarily.

Since then the Kukis, who were independent tribes living further eastward used to make frequent murderous raids on the British subjects in Cachar, Noakhali, Comilla and other neighbouring tracts under Rani Kalindi. They raided Chittagong Hill Tracts and the neighbouring tracts in 1847, 1848, 1859 and 1860<sup>[11]</sup>. As a consequence with a view to paying the necessary attention to the areas of the front areas experiencing repeated raids and to protecting the people from the aggression of the independent tribes living further east but primarily to

occupy the Chakma land, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal recommended the removal of the hill tracts from the regulation district and the appointment of Superintendent over the tribes.

Both these recommendations were adopted by an act XXII 1860AD which came into effect from 18 August of that year. Thus Hill Tracts were separated from Chittagong and a superintendent was appointed for Chittagong Hill Tracts and its headquarters was established at Chandraghona. The hills in his charge were henceforth known by the name of the Hill Tracts of Chittagong. For the next few years attention was directed to the preservation of peace of the frontier. In 1869 headquarters was shifted to Rangamati. Earlier the official designation of the post of superintendent was changed to Deputy Commissioner and full control of all matters pertaining to both revenue and justice throughout the Hill Tracts was vested in his office.

With the prevailing frontier situation in the British government put pressure on the Chakma chief to shift his capital to Rangamati and ultimately in 1874 it was shifted to Rangamati from Rajanagar. At that time cotton was heavily grown in Chittagong Hill Tracts and it was much important to the British for their mills. Hence effective control of Chittagong Hill Tracts was also important for them.

In 1881 the government decided to divide Chittagong Hill Tracts into three circles and the rulers were designated as chiefs. The circles are Chakma Circle, Bohmong Circle and Mong Circle.

Each circle was headed by a chief. Chakma circle was headed by a Chakma, Bohmong circle by a Bohmong and the Mong circle by a Mong. The Chakma circle was centrally located and inhabited mainly by the Chakmas, the Bohmong circle

was under the subjection of the Bohmong chief of Arakanese extraction/origin and the Mong circle was also inhabited by the Arakanese speaking clans with a sprinkling of Tripuraimmigrants and headed by another ruler of Arakanese extraction. The reason of this division was that the British government was not in favour of the strong power of the Chakma Chief who held control over these hilly tribes. Further the government was feeling increasingly concerned about the political and administrative affairs of these tracts. Hence they aimed firstly to lay the foundation of administration in a restricted manner with the following basic objectives

After the creation of a separate district and also three circles, the Kuki menace to Chittagong Hill Tracts and other adjoining areas did not stop. The Shendus, another ferocious tribe made occasional raids in the Hill Tracts between 1865 and 1888 and killed many people including massacre of Lt.Steward and his survey party. In 1872, 1890 military offensives were launched simultaneously into Lushai Hills from Chittagong and Burma in collaboration with the governments of Bengal, Assam and Burma and the whole of Kookie land was brought under British control.

On 1 April 1900, the South and the North Lushai Hills (then a part of Chittagong Hill Tracts) were merged to form a district of Assam province with headquarters at Aizawl. Lushai hills are now the present day Mizoram state of India. Due to revision of the boundaries, the Chakma chief had to forge some of his lands as also the subjects.

Later the British through the Deputy Commissioner took over absolute power in Chittagong Hill Tracts including the Chakma circle after implementation of



the Chittagong Hill Tracts manual. Chittagong Hill Tracts was again declared as an Excluded Area under the British India act of 1935.

### **3.4 Modern time**

Like in India, the Chakmas have lived in the modern state of Bangladesh much before it gained its independence. However, recent migrations of ethnic Bengalis into traditionally Chakma regions of Bangladesh have raised tensions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Successive governments have dealt forcefully with Chakma uprisings, and finally ended the conflict with The 1997 Peace Treaty. This forcefull dealing resulted in the migration of a large population of Chakmas into the states of Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh of the present Indian Union. The Chakmas now have representations in the Mizoram General Assembly. The only seat of political power and identity is the "Chakma Autonomous District Council" in India, though it covers only 35% of the Chakmas living in Mizoram State in India. <sup>[2]</sup>

## **4. Basic features of Chakma**

### **4.1 Appearance**

Chakma people are usually very strong and healthy as they mount on the hills regularly. Chakma people have a strong resemblance with the Mongoloid people. Often they have fair complexion, rounded face, and thinner lips. They usually have small eyes with black eye lid, less facial hair and almost a bare skin. The average height of a Chakma man is around 5'-6'' where the woman has an average of 5' 4'.



Img. 1 : A Chakma Girl

## 4.2 Housing and living conditions

Chakma usually make house 6 feet above from the ground. They use ladder to climb on to their house. Each house is divided into multiple blocks and the main block has the average 40 feet length and 25 feet width. They make their house by the side of rivers and in the hills. Usually these houses are sorted in a row and all looks very charming. However, due to the wind of change many Chakma are giving up living in those traditional house and starting to live in modern buildings and apartments.



Img.2 : A typical Chakma House

## 4.3 Food and eating habit

The staple food of the Chakma are rice , fish , vegetables and wine. They make the wine by themselves. They have the least restrictions to eat. They eat almost all the food items , for example : hen, snail , oyster , crab , deer , frog. Traditional diets have slowly been abandoned, as the Chakmas have been forced to flee their homeland. Some typical Chakma dishes include fish, vegetables, and spices stuffed into a length of bamboo and cooked in a low fire; foods wrapped in banana leaves and placed beside a fire; and eggs that are aged until they are rotten.

Chakmas do not like milk. They drink alcoholic beverages freely, and every household makes its own rice liquor. Alcohol is consumed at all festivals and social occasions.

#### 4.4 Dress and ornaments:

In keeping with their ancient traditions, Chakma women wear an ankle-length cloth, known as a phinon, around their waists, while being covered above the waist with a wrapped cloth known as a hadi. Both these garments are colorfully hand woven with a variety of intricate designs. They wear a piece of cloth from waist to knee and another to cover the upper part of the body. Traditional male dress is “Dhuti” and “Panjabi”. They wear hand loomed towel



Img.3: Traditional Dress

and sometimes a turban on their head. Women decorate themselves by ornaments of silver and copper and flower. Chakma women wear bangles and anklets, as well as coin earrings and necklaces. However, educated Chakma are wearing modern dresses and all the modern ornaments like a modern women now a days.

#### 4.5 Entertainment and recreation

*Ha-do-do* is a game played throughout the region. Two teams stand on either side of a central line. They take turns sending a player into opposing territory to touch as many people as he or she can during the space of one breath, while at the same time saying "Ha-do-do." If the player runs out of breath or is caught by



Img. 3: Chakma "Pala Gaan"

his or her opponents, he or she is out. On the other hand, if the player successfully returns to his or her own territory, the players he or she has tagged must leave the game. Other pastimes include *Gila Khela*, a game similar to marbles except that small wooden disks are used instead of marbles; *Nadeng Khela*, played with a spinning top; and various wrestling games. Girls do not have dolls or play at being "mother" as they do in Western cultures.

The Chakma are skilled at making a variety of household goods from bamboo, often using nothing more than a simple knife. Women are expert weavers and dyers and make their own cloth called *Alam*. They are skilled in the art of making baskets from bamboo and cane that are grown in the hilly tract of Chittagong.

#### **4.6 Relationship and family life**

Chakma hospitality is overflowing. Guests are given home-brewed liquor and the *hukka* (hooka) pipe. The hukka is a pipe used for smoking tobacco. It has a long flexible tube attached to a water bottle. The smoke is cooled by passing over the water before being inhaled by the smoker.

Chakmas greet each other with the traditional cry, *Hoya!* This exuberant shout is also used to express pleasure at victory in sports such as tug-of-war that accompany the numerous hill festivals held throughout the year. After living for so many years near Muslims, some Chakmas use the Muslim greeting, *Salaam*.

Chakmas are divided into clans (*gojas*), which are further subdivided into subclans (*guttis*). Members of the same subclan are forbidden to marry each other. Parents arrange marriages, although the wishes of sons and daughters are taken into account. A bride price (goods given by groom's family to bride's family) is fixed when the two families negotiate the marriage.

The marriage ceremony is known as *Chumulong* and is performed by Buddhist priests. If young people elope, the marriage can be formalized on payment of fines. Polygyny (marriage to more than one wife) is acceptable but rare. Divorce is allowed, as is remarriage after the death of a spouse.

### **5. Employment**

The Chakmas are farmers. There is no ownership of land, but Chakma custom holds that no one should interfere with fields that look like someone else is farming there. Land is cleared of trees and bushes, and any remaining vegetation

is burned during the dry season in April. Crops are planted after the first heavy rains. Harvesting usually takes place in October and November. Traditionally, the Chakma lifestyle was closely linked with hill agriculture or shifting cultivation (*jum* in Chakma and *jhum* in Bengali). Living in settled villages, they would cultivate plots on surrounding hills for some years, then leave them fallow to recuperate naturally. Chakmas also cultivated land in river valleys. They had a well-developed system of land rights, which differed sharply from those in the plains.

Some Chakmas have given up their farming lifestyle and have entered the labor market. Those fortunate enough to have the necessary education have gone on to clerical and other white collar jobs. Many, however, work as laborers in the factories and industrial projects that have grown up along the valley of the Karnafuli River.

## **6. Religion and beliefs**

The Chakmas are Buddhists. Chakmas officially follow the Southern, or Theravada, form of the Buddhism. But, their form of Buddhism has aspects of Hinduism and traditional religions as well.

Almost every Chakma village has a Buddhist temple (*kaang*). Buddhist priests or monks are called *Bhikhus*. They preside at religious festivals and ceremonies. The villagers support their monks with food, gifts, and offerings to Buddha.

The Chakmas also worship Hindu deities. Lakshmi, for example, is worshipped as the Goddess of the Harvest. Chakmas offer the sacrifice of goats, chickens, or ducks to calm the spirits that are believed to bring fevers and disease. Even

though animal sacrifice is totally against Buddhist beliefs, the Chakma Buddhist priests ignore the practice.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **7. Language and culture**

### **7.1 Language**

Chakma language is more the most advanced of the tribal languages. Some old puthis are extant in this language. One of them, Chadigang Chara Pala was written on palm leaf. This puthi reveals that the Chakmas originated in Nepal and after roaming about in several Southeast Asian countries came to old Burma and Arakan before settling in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Their original name was 'Tsak', in the Arakani language they were called 'Chak', in the dialect of Chittagong 'Chamua', and in the Chakma language 'Chakma'.

The alphabets of the Chakma language are similar to the alphabets of Thailand's Ksmer, Annam Laos, Cambodia, Syam and South Burma. Tara, the scripture of the Chakmas, is written in the Burmese script. When spoken, the Chakma alphabet has a soft sound and is generally articulated from the bottom of the tongue. It is primarily based on sound and has a Chinese tone. In many respects (including philology, prosody, folklore, idioms and phonology) it is close to Bangla. All sounds of Bangla Language are also available in the Chakma language. Efforts are now being made to write the Chakma language in the Burmese or Myanmar script. A book of primary reading in Chakma has also been published from Rangamati. Its author is Nayanram Chakma.

There are many songs written in the Chakma language. These have been composed in colloquial Chakma. The language of the book Gozel Lama written by the Chakma poet Shivcharan in 1777 is almost like Bangla. Its introductory song is similar to those in Purbabanga Geetika. Radhaman Dhanapadi and Chadigang Chara Pala are two important lyrical poems. The metres used in Chakmas and Bangla verse are almost similar. The syntax of the two languages are also identical. The numbers in Chakma language are pronounced as in Bangla. The minus symbol in Chakma is called 'farak' and the sign of multiplication is called 'duna'. The other symbols are the same in both languages. In the Chakma language s (anusvar) is called 'ek fuda', t (bisarga) is called 'dvifuda' and u (chandrabindu) is called 'chanfuda'.

Chakma folk literature is quite rich. It has many folklores and fables. A traditional folk song of the Chakmas is 'ubhagit'. Proverbs and traditional sayings are a unique feature of the Chakma language. These sayings mainly centre on farming, animals and birds, nature, society, religion and the mystery of the human body. These sayings in the Chakma language are called 'dagwa kadha'. In conjugation and declension present day Chakma language is close to Bangla, Assamese, Rajbangshi, Garo, Sanghma and Chittagonian. This language has 6 regional forms. Within the Chakmas different clans have their distinct dialects.<sup>[4]</sup>



## 7.2 Culture

Like the other tribal groups, Chakma has a enchanting culture adorned with numerous festivals. Folk music is a major aspect of Chakma tribal culture. It includes romantic love songs known as *Ubageet*. The *Genkhuli* ballads relate incidents from the past. There are also epic poems like *Radhamon and Dhanapati*.

Traditional musical instruments include a bugle made from buffalo horn, a circular piece of iron with a string stretched across it that vibrates to produce sound, and a drum. The bamboo flute is played by almost all Chakma youth. Unlike other tribal groups of the eastern hills, dancing is not an important part of Chakma life.



Img.5: The traditional dance of Chakma

Buddhists books, translated into Chakma and written on palm leaves, are known as *Aghartara*. The *Tallik* is a detailed account of medicinal plants, methods of their preparation, and their use in the treatment of disease. *Biju* the three day long festival is the main cultural festival of Chakma People marking the end of the Bengali calendar. It's celebrated with singing, dancing, drinking and general merriment on the 13 April every year. The day is a public holiday only in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Chakmas celebrate various Buddhist festivals. The most important is *Buddha Purnima*. This is the anniversary of three important events in Buddha's life—his birth, his attainment of enlightenment, and his death. It is observed on the full moon day of the month of Vaisakh (usually in May).

On this and other festival days, Chakmas put on their best clothes and visit the temple. There, they offer flowers to the image of Buddha, light candles, and listen to sermons from the priests. Alms (offerings) are given to the poor, and feasts are held for the priests.

The three-day festival known as *Bishu*, which coincides with the Bengali New Year's Day, is celebrated with much enthusiasm. Houses are decorated with flowers, young children pay special attention to the elderly to win their blessings, and festive dishes are prepared for guests. They also perform traditional dance with melodious songs adorned by their own traditional music on those occasions.

[5]

## **8. Contribution of Chakma for Bangladesh**

Chakma people are getting educated now days. They are learning Bangla language and customs beside their own language and tradition. So the number of educated and apt Chakmas is far more than the other surviving tribal people of Bangladesh. The educated Chakma men and women are doing jobs in different parts of Bangladesh both in public and private sectors and also in the civil services and thus taking part in the development process of Bangladesh. As they get the

“Tribal people quota” , many young Chakma are getting admitted into famous universities of Bangladesh and abroad as well.

In the liberation war of 1971 , many Chakma fought against West Pakistan and took part in the carnival of grabbing the golden sun of independence. They also participated boldly in the time of language movement and in any kind of oppression against Bangladesh. Thus their contribution to Bangladesh is not little.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **9. Problems in the hilly tracts and the fate of the Chakma**

In 1972, after liberation, the tribal people asked for autonomy, with a separate legislative body, and retention of the 1900 Regulations against non-tribal settlers. This was refused by Sheikh Mujib, who led the Bangladeshi Independence movement. In the Liberation War, some tribal people had been against the creation of Bangladesh, which earned them the mistrust of Bengalis. A military presence and administration were soon established. The response by the hill people was the formation of the Shanti Bahini (peace force) in 1972. Violent army operations started in 1980 in response to an ambush of 22 soldiers. These hilly tracts have been subject to an extraordinary violence, which in turn evoked a violent response. Between 1980 and 1997, almost 10,000 people are known to have died in the low-intensity war which ravaged the already damaged environment and culture of the Chakmas. The cause of conflict was the influx of Bengali settlers from the plains in the 1970s: this upset the demographic balance, and made the traditional jhum (slash and burn) cultivation no longer sustainable.

The 5,093 square miles of the Hill Tracts (almost 10 per cent of the land mass of Bangladesh) became highly militarised; 70,000 people crossed the border to India and 60,000 more were internally displaced by massacres, burnings and evictions.

In December 1997, the Awami League government signed a Peace Accord with the Shanti Bahini, the armed force of the tribal people in the Hill Tracts, recognising their right to land, culture, language and religion. However, The Chakmas and the other tribal groups never established permanent settlements. Everyone knew how to build the temporary shelters which were abandoned as jhum cultivation moved on. Villages were rarely registered with the government. It was into these 'uninhabited' places that settlers came; a process encouraged under military rule from 1975 until 1991, with its crusade to Bengalise or perhaps to Islamise the hill peoples. The Peace Accord recognises the old demand for autonomy -- the land rights of the Adivasis, their right to preservation of culture, language and religious observance. When the Accord was signed, the majority of the hill people laid down their arms, although some dissident groups continued sporadic attacks and kidnappings. Santu Larma is leader of the Chattagram Jana Samata Samhiti, which speaks for the majority of the tribal people. He is increasingly concerned that the most significant points of the Accord have yet to be implemented. Many Chakmas are restive, doubting the good faith of the Bangladeshi Government, and some speak of re-joining the dissident groups who never believed in the Accord.

The principal point of contention is the difficulty which any Bangladeshi Government would face in dispossessing Bengalis of land they now possess, and

returning it to non-Muslims. Although part of the agreement was the rehabilitation of settlers who had usurped tribal land, there is nowhere else for them to go. Although some of the Chakmas have returned to their homes, the Land Commission which was to have been set up to ensure this was equitably carried out, has yet to come into existence. Only a fraction of the 500 or more military and paramilitary camps have closed, and the promised Hill Tracts District and Regional Councils are not operating. Meanwhile, the people continue to lose their identity. The Chakma songs are influenced by Bengali words and melodies; schools offer instruction only in Bengali. Shame inhibits many younger people from wearing the traditional ornaments, and the artefacts made of bamboo -- fish-traps, bird-traps, storage baskets for fodder, fruit, yams or leaves, flutes and pipes -- can no longer be made because the bamboo has gone.

The present Chakma king is now a barrister living in Dhaka. 'There is nowhere left for us to go', says Sukheshwar Chakma, a teacher. 'We have taken refuge in the dense forests of the mind. But that doesn't provide livelihood.'

The people of the Hill Tracts, with their songs and dances perpetuated only by self-conscious cultural groups, are in danger of becoming like many indigenous peoples all over the world -- ethnicity without a culture. This forfeit they are free to go and mourn in city slums, with all the consolations the modern world can offer them -- alcohol, drugs and despair. Such impoverishment cannot be measured by the instruments of economic performance. It represents a loss, not only to them, but also to the world.<sup>[7]</sup>

## 10. Recommendations

- Government of Bangladesh should take some proper steps to eradicate all the prevailing problems in the hilly tracts of Chittagong.
- The Chakmas should be given opportunity to get educated on their own language and to practice their own traditions, norms, rituals and culture.
- The tribal quota in jobs and education should be practiced without any corruption.
- Securing and protecting their living places from the land grabbers.
- Financing the Chakma people and giving them the option to earn their livelihood.
- Encouraging NGOs to come forward and help the poor people by giving small loan, educating them and raising awareness among them.
- Finally, to save their own culture, they should be given more opportunities to practice their culture. The government must come take some proper steps to uphold their culture and to save it from being extinct.

## **11. Conclusion**

Chakma has some great cultures and pattern of life. They adorned Bangladeshi culture by diluting their own culture in it. They also took part in all the partisan movement undertaken by Bangladesh. Although the Chakmas are intensely protective of their ancient traditions and culture, in recent years they have found that the outside world has begun to encroach on their land as well as their heritage. In an effort to preserve their way of life and to secure the right to participate in any governmental decision making processes that affect them, the Chakmas have been outspoken and active in the international arena, but only time will tell whether the Chakma tribe will succeed in holding on to the way of life which makes them unique. We hope that in the coming days the government of Bangladesh will come forward to protect and uphold the culture and traditions of the great tribal group “Chakma”.

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