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# Gandian Political Philosophy and their Views on Modern Political System

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**ABSTRACT:** Gandhi was a political actionist and a practical philosopher. He was not a theorist. His writings abound with inconsistencies – one result of his persistent habit of thinking in public. Whatever philosophical formulations he made were inspired by and directed towards solving of immediate problems. The unsophisticated explanations which Gandhi offered for his methods, his objectives, his policy, and creed were part of a program of action. Gandhi represents the culmination of this discourse. He modernizes tradition by highlighting the problem of modern industrialized westernized civilization in the Hind Swaraj, considered to be the most important tract in political theory. His major success as a modernizer of tradition is possible due to the groundwork that the aforesaid earlier thinkers laid down. But the major difference between these earlier thinkers and Gandhi lay in his ability to perform a transformative criticism of many of the ideas that the earlier thinkers dealt with. Gandhi believed in human equality and never thought in terms of race or status. His technique of Satyagraha is a method of defeating the enemy without preaching hatred. Many of Gandhi's ideas have found resonance in the West and elsewhere particularly among the peace activists, environmental groups and feminists. His technique of non-violent civil disobedience has many adherents like Martin Luther King.

**KEYWORDS:** Hind Swaraj, Satyagraha, Disobedience, Non-cooperation and Ahimsa.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gandhi is one of the great activist-theoreticians of the twentieth century. His writings emerged mainly during the varied process of social, economic and political actions. As Bondurant observed, "One cannot... turn to the writings of Gandhi for a definite statement in political theory. Gandhi was a political actionist and a practical philosopher; he was not a theorist. His writings abound with inconsistencies – one result of his persistent habit of thinking in public. Whatever philosophical formulations he made were inspired by and directed towards solving of immediate problems. The unsophisticated explanations which Gandhi offered for his methods, his objectives, his policy, and creed were part of a program of action. They should not be interpreted in terms either of a theory or of practical master planning" (Bondurant, 1967, p.7 What I have done will endure, not what I have said and written. I have often said that even if all our scriptures perish one mantra of Upanishad was enough to declare the essence of Hinduism- but even that one verse will be of no avail if there is no one to live it (cited in Bose and Patwardhan, 1967, p.56). Dalton observes that Gandhi formed his beliefs much before he arrived in South Africa, evident from his Autobiography in which he mentions his childhood experiences and lessons which helped to crystallize two of his core ideas: truth and non violence. However, South Africa became "the laboratory of Gandhi's experiments; it proved an excellent testing ground, since many of the problems which he later found in India occurred there in miniature" (Dalton 1982, p.134). ). During his entire life, Gandhi wrote three book-length works. The Hind Swaraj (1909) contains the idea that emerged from his experiences in South Africa. The aim of Hind Swaraj was to answer the anarchists with an alternative to violence, derived from Gandhi's earliest experiments with Satyagraha. Equally important is the book's concern with the concept from which it takes its title: this is Gandhi's first extensive statement on swaraj, and the ideas on it which he sets forth here provide the basis for much of his future thinking on the meaning of freedom. "Hind Swaraj, then, is a statement on both the method and the goal of Gandhi's thought: Satyagraha and Swaraj" (Ibid, 136). The most important, his Autobiography first appeared in a serialized form in one of his Gujarati journals. The other two were Satyagraha in South Africa and the Hind Swaraj (1909). Gandhi himself was conscious of the inadequacies of his writings both at the theoretical and scholarly levels. In a Socratic manner, he considered his life as his message and observed: As a matter of fact, my writings should be cremated with my body. Aims and Objectives After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand The background to modern Indian thought The intellectual influences that shaped Gandhi's thought Gandhi's critique of the West and his seeking indigenous roots to explain his views



## II. AUTONOMY OF MODERN INDIAN THOUGHT

Though the Western assessment of the ancient Indian political thought is very discouraging, it is both rich and varied. This tradition is very old beginning with the Vedic period followed by the Upanishads, the Dharma Shastras, Buddhist literature, Manu Smriti, the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata and the Arthashastra schools. This was followed by the advent of Islamic thought from eighth century onwards. The best flowering of Islamic political theory came during the reign of the Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great. The major challenge to modern political theorising has been its continued search of identity in the fact of the domination of Western thought and culture, which inevitably follows the two hundred years of presence of British imperialism. In sharp contrast to many other areas of the world where imperialism destroyed all traces of indigenous cultures, traditions and even languages, the Indian society reflects continuous debate and dialogue with the West, which makes modern Indian political theory distinctive and autonomous. This trend begins at the very inception with the writings and actions of Raja Rammohan Roy, who is the first most important political thinker of modern times after India came in contact with Western ideas and institutions. With the establishment of the Asiatic Society in 1844 under the able guidance of William Jones, the dissection of ancient Sanskrit literature begins throwing light on the rich heritage of ancient Indian civilisation. These facts are unknown to the educated Indians and act as a great stimulus in creating a new confidence. This is exemplified in the actions of Rammohan. In fact Rammohan is the first great precursor of commentators like Will Durant who rightly believed in the progress and advance of civilisation as a co-operative enterprise. This enables the modern Indian thinkers to renew and reform their own institutions in light of Western knowledge and experience without renouncing their own cultural tradition and inheritance. The path initiated by Rammohan is followed and elaborated by Kesub Chandra Sen, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi represents the culmination of this discourse. He modernises tradition by highlighting the problem of modern industrialised westernised civilisation in the Hind Swaraj, considered to be the most important tract in political theory. His major success as a moderniser of tradition is possible due to the groundwork that the aforesaid earlier thinkers laid down. But the major difference between these earlier thinkers and Gandhi lay in his ability to perform a transformative criticism of many of the ideas that the earlier thinkers dealt with. This also leads him to create a new epoch in modern political theorizing by developing a theory of praxis. From the limited context of Champaran to the later mass movements, Gandhi inaugurates a totally new kind of political discourse dealing with important concepts like the nature of truth, role of man, and a conception of an ideal state with a constructive programme for the Indian society. However, even during this period which is called the Gandhian era, the autonomy and diversity of modern Indian political theory reflects in the debates that takes place between Gandhi and the Marxists, and the Revolutionary Nationalists and a significant debate between Gandhi and Tagore. The interesting point to note about the divergence of opinion between Gandhi and Tagore is that in spite of their commitment to non-violence and search for truth, they differ in their assessment of the Indian reality and also in their critical dissection of the West. In this context, two important developments deserve special mention. First, his own assessment of the earlier thinkers and reforms in which he differs considerably from many of his contemporaries. Second, he changes the very context of re-examining the content of modernisation of Hindu society, and provides a dramatically opposite interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita to the one that Tilak popularises.

## III. INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES ON GANDHI

Gandhi grows to political maturity in the West, which means that his essential experience is the British experience. He exhibits considerable influence of Western thinkers like Ruskin, Thoreau and Tolstoy throughout his life. He regards Socrates as an example to emulate and even translates Plato's Apology in Gujarati. In basic principles of politics, he indicates a marked preference for anarchism, which essentially belongs to a radical Western tradition. In organisational matters, the Western imprint is clearly discernible in him. In matters of personal conviction like vegetarianism, some western groups and writings clearly influence him. Salt's A Plea for Vegetarianism, as Woodcock says, 'is a revelation to Gandhi for it defended in rational terms the teachings transmitted to his half-attentive mind in childhood by means of myth and precept. The dietary exercises he began under Salt's inspiration were the first of his experiments with truth'. Gandhi acknowledges Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau as exerting profound intellectual influence on him though Ruskin's Unto This Last transforms his life. An English friend H.S. L. Polak gives the book to him for him to read while undertaking a 24-hour journey from Johannesburg to Durban in 1904. He summarises his understanding of the book into three principles:

- 1) That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
- 2) That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.



3) That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living. The first of these I knew. The second I had dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me. Unto This Last made it as clear as daylight for me that the second and third were contained in the first. I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice (Gandhi, 1954, 365). Gandhi learns from Ruskin that an unequal social order not linked from realities of labour could not allow for the possibility of non-violence. Like Ruskin, he also believes in restricting wealth and placing tools in the hands of those who could use them. Ruskin's principles inspires Gandhi to work out the basis of his concept of 'bread labour', of making the community organisation responsible for the welfare of the labourer and stress on cooperation rather than competition. These ideas are put into practice during the mill strike in Ahmadabad (Erikson, 1969). It was at this time that he adopted the simple life and identified himself with the masses of the poor (McLaughlin, 1974, P.15,18). Tolstoy's faith in love and teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible and the New Testament and Thoreau's notion of civil disobedience helps Gandhi to delineate his concept of Satyagraha. Inspired by Thoreau, Gandhi advocates emancipation of the human being from external bondage, from self-imposed imprisonment which he terms as civilisation for it has diseased the mind and soul of a modern person. Gandhi is as removed from the Marxist ideal of a socialist, stateless, classless utopia as he is from other Western socialist schools like the Fabian socialists and the Guild socialists. He opposes the Marxists' deterministic account of society and history, their belief in class polarisation and antagonisms, denial of God and their emphasis on violent revolutionary change. Gandhi advocates a concept of minimum living wage and proportionate equality permitting differences among individuals beyond the minimum on the basis of differing needs. Ruskin's ideas on political economy are the bedrock of the principles of Gandhi's ashram organizations, the Phoenix Farm, an experimental community of Indians and Europeans which also published the Indian Opinion, the Tolstoy Farm of 1910 and the Sabarmati Ashram. Ruskin influenced Gandhi's conception of soul-force as a substitute for physical force; he was the chief source of Gandhi's economic ideas; but, above all, he changed Gandhi as a person. ...Thus it was from his reading of Ruskin that Gandhi dated his renunciation of money and professional advancement, his choice of a way of life that led him eventually to call himself a farmer and weaver rather than a lawyer, and his definition of the ideals that his disciples as well as himself should embrace. Gandhi not only emphasises gradual non-violent change but also desires to restrict the ambit of revolution and state action. Gandhi upholds private property and that society should recognise the art of creating wealth though he proposes the institution of Trusteeship based on a harmonious relationship between the capitalists and the workers. However, like the Marxists and the Socialists, he desires an egalitarian, just and non-exploitative society. Gandhi also differs considerably from the liberals. Though he cherishes individual rights and initiatives he is not concerned with maximizing freedom. Like Green, he emphasises the social nature of the human individual as "essentially a social being". The only western parallel to Gandhi may be Rousseau, for like the latter, he too idealizes a glorious past but realizes that since there is no going back, salvation lies in small independent self-governing, self-sufficient communities. Gandhi describes himself as a philosophical anarchist for "he envisaged the perfect society as anarchical where each individual is a law to himself, living peacefully and with goodwill towards all, controlling all his passion, and living by his own labour. It is a romantic ideal which attracted men like Rousseau and Ruskin and is opposed to the sort of social organisation idealized by Plato in the Republic". He prefers a society where the state would be reduced to its minimalist role. Gandhi's faith in the inherent goodness of human nature enables him to win over his enemies through persuasion. Hence the Gandhian movements remain entirely open.

#### IV. CRITIC OF THE WEST

The rise and modernisation of Japan in the early part of the twentieth century had stirred emotional sentiments in India. Gandhi cites the Japanese example and instructs his Indian readers not to follow the Japanese model. The solution to the Indian problem has to come from within India rather than importing foreign ideas and institutions. Gandhi's free India is one where the economy and polity would be different from that of the other modern industrialised nations. This is because countries like India with abundant labour and large-scale unemployment and under-employment should restrict the use of machinery. He desires industrialisation that would satisfy wants like food, shelter, health care and basic education. Though conscious of the impersonal and monotonous life that industrialisation entails, he is ready to accept it if it helps to satisfy the basic human requirements. Gandhi's attitude to the West differs considerably from other non-Western revolutionaries. Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon not only 'rejected the Western political and economic domination but also their traditional ways of life of their own people and especially the religious elements that provided the foundation for the ancient cultures of Asia and Africa, replacing them by Western political forms and by Western technologies' (Woodcock, 1970, p.12). Fanon's perception shows some interesting contradictions into the dilemma of Third World revolutionaries. Fanon forcefully pleads for de-colonisation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) but is utterly contemptuous of the imperialists. He denounces the Europeans virtually as war criminals. In spite of being influenced by the West, Gandhi rejects Western civilisation both as a model and as an inspiration. His vision has very little to do with the West. The Hind Swaraj is the primer of his political philosophy to



which he remains consistently committed. He denounces Western materialism and modern technology like the railways, the telegraph, the telephone and heavy industries. He categorically rejects all the major components of the modern industrial civilisation. It is this severe indictment of the modern society that is significant and has very few parallels. In its uncompromising criticism it compares favourably with that of Rousseau's Discourses on Inequality (1755). Gandhi considers the advent of technology and industrialisation as the basic cause of human misery in modern society. This view crystallises during the process of industrialisation in South Africa. He hails the immense increase in productivity and consequent rise in standards of living in the West but he denies that industrialisation, in its current form, advanced human civilisation and its well-being and happiness. He rejects the Western civilisation for two reasons. First, its basis is extreme inequality and second it dehumanises and de-personalises the individual. Like Rousseau, herejects modern technology and industrialisation because these lead to misery and inequality. He focuses on this relative fall apparent from the Italian example in the Hind Swaraj. In this example he specifically mentions the working class and the common people whose aspirations the ruling class ignore and Mazzini's Italy that was still in slavery. For Gandhi the content of independence is important for true freedom lay in the freedom of the working class and the poorest. Western technology and its concomitant way of life are alien to Indian traditions. It is also inadequate in fulfilling India's requirements and hinders any meaningful or real development of the individual person. As such, the ideal state would consist of self-sufficient villages and communities based on truth and non-violence. Gandhi desires a free India that would not emulate the Western path. This means giving up machinery, modern methods of transportation, modern medicines and machine-spun cloth. Though he modifies some of his ideas subsequently like accepting small-scale industries and those industries where labour is not useful or desirable, he adheres to the overall thrust of his initial arguments as articulated in the Hind Swaraj. He regards European opulence as scandalous 'for it has been founded on slavery...and that it comes directly from the soil and from the sub-soil of the underdeveloped world'. Ironically in spite of this severe indictment, Fanon conceives of change only with the indispensable help of the Europeans and by rejecting indigenous ways. Gandhi, on the other hand, wants to keep the windows of his mind open while his feet are firmly entrenched in his own culture. His entire emphasis revolves around the proposition that Indian problems should be solved by indigenous methods and not by Western ideas as these are incompatible. It is this synthetic outlook, retaining the best of the Western traditions and integrating it with indigenous roots of the Indian traditions that make Gandhi unique. There is nothing exclusively Indian about his ideas. He castigates Indians for not reforming outmoded social practices and customs and stresses on the importance of social justice and equity. A free India has to be free from the modern political and economic institutions.

## V. A SEEKER OF INDIGENOUS ROOTS

Gandhi's conception of Swaraj is different to the one that is articulated by the Western Marxists, socialists or even the liberals though he assimilates their ideas. He is an ardent individualist like the liberals but his ideal is maximizing individual freedom by promoting common good. Philosophically, like the anarchists, his ideal remains a society where the state plays a minimal role but he shuns their stress on revolutionary violence. Like the Marxists and socialists he desires an egalitarian society but opposes their deterministic view of history and human nature. Yet he is certain that reform would have come from within India. He desires, like Burke, to retain India's ancient heritage and modernising whatever is worth salvaging and useful. He is an anarchist, a liberal, a socialist and a conservative and yet none of these for, he never lost his profoundly revolutionary character (Bondurant, 1967, p.3). He is essentially concerned with contemporary problems and tries to find solutions that are both desirable and feasible. Gandhi defies classification as the prophet of bourgeois nationalism in India. First, the means that he employed "are such that they will successfully end only if the masses become self-acting towards the latter part of the revolution, and the chances are that if the masses gain success through their fully developed conscious strength, they will also refuse to be exploited in future by anybody who wishes to ride upon their back. Second, Gandhi did not want India to benefit at the expense of any other nation. He considered humanity as one family. In the twentieth century, Tagore and M. N. Roy, along with Gandhi, portray an autonomous evolution of political discourse. All three, rooted in the Western experience, attempt to transcend it by initiating a discourse that is closer to the Indian reality. Tagore denounces the Western cult of nationalism by emphasising universality. Roy's participatory democracy is an attempt to go beyond both liberal representative democracy and authoritarian centralized communism. Gandhi uses Western concepts and ideals to critically dissect the shortcomings of India but the reconstruction of India is quintessentially Indian. Gandhi provides a comprehensive critique of Western modernity and modernization by contesting the assumptions and conclusions of a self-confident orientalism, particularly its views about the inferiority of the East and the superiority of the modernity of the West. Because of this Gandhi transcended bourgeois nationalism" (Bose, 1947, pp.21-22). This autonomous development of Gandhi's ideas represents the fullest expression of the indigenous roots of modern Indian political speculation. From Rammohan to Vivekananda, the quest has been for assimilation of the Western ideas and culture with that of the East. At the same time he rejects readings of Hinduism as



inherently fatalistic and passive and seeks to recover robust conception of autonomy and action in his tradition. To analyse Gandhi's role in Indian transformation realistically one has to take his role as a social critic seriously. His dissection of the causes of disparity in the Indian situation led him to two conclusions:

(1) Imperialistic exploitation and (2) limitation of the capitalist industrialized civilization of the west. His solution to this is in "a kind of democracy... where the gulf between the rich and the poor was not so marked, where the evils of the great cities were absent and people lived in contact with the life-giving soil and breathed the pure air of the open spaces" (Nehru, 1965, p.111). His vision of India is one "in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony".

## VI. ADMIRATION OF THE BRITISH INSTITUTIONS

The use of the technique of Satyagraha is also an offshoot of Gandhi's understanding of both British history and character. He was convinced that the redressal of grievances could be expected only when the people demonstrated that they were willing to suffer for getting relief. In this context, he gave the example of the British Suffragists asking the Indians in South Africa to emulate them by developing the capacity to endure suffering. The best of suffering was the yardstick by which the British conceded and Gandhi gave the example of the century long struggle for women in Britain to secure the right to vote. Many years later, he recollected that "an Englishman never respects you till you stand up to him. Then, he begins to like you. He is afraid of nothing physical, but he is mortally afraid of his own conscience, if even you appeal to it and show him to be in the wrong. He does not like to be rebuked for wrong doing at first, but he will think over it, and it will get hold of him and hurt him till he does something to put it right". But it is equally true that Gandhi, as a political strategist, was linking it to changing events in Ireland, England and India. He reminded all the time the importance of the South African struggle for India. The Indian National Congress leadership enthusiastically supported the South African struggle of the Indians and till Gandhi's return to India, it was the one issue that agitated the educated Indian mind. For Gandhi himself, the South African experience taught him two basic lessons that he implemented in India and subsequently (a) united struggle of all irrespective of caste, creed and religion and (b) the sublime importance of open non-violent struggle. This is reinforced by the fact that though the technique of Satyagraha could be used everywhere and be an alternative to war in resolving conflict, yet he was also categorical, that its most effective use could be against the British. Gandhi wrote in 1904: "Earnestness commands success everywhere. It does so much more in the British Dominions. If the British machinery is slow to move, the genius of the nation being conservative, it is also quick to perceive and recognize earnestness and unity". He reflected this again in 1907, that the British would concede if the people were willing to sacrifice even their lives for the cause. But they would ignore even the genuine demands, when they were merely verbal. Even in their own country, the British follow the same principles. Following this general principle of stages of constitutional agitation and open movements, which he followed throughout, he himself admitted that the doctrine of Satyagraha could be invoked only after exhausting other constitutional means of protests. Gandhi's innate respect for the British sense of justice continued even after his return to India and during the First World War, he recruited soldiers for the British army unconditionally whereas, both Tilak and Jinnah refused to do so without any advancement of the nationalist cause. This confidence which he had in the ultimate British sense of justice was shattered by the horrors of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. However, in spite of this shock and his overall criticism of Western civilisation, and the parliamentary system, he proclaimed in 1921, that his immediate aim was parliamentary swaraj, whereas the rest was for a distant future. His faith in the British sense of fair play was shaken but not his faith about the feasibility of the essential mechanism of the British parliamentary institutions. Orwell points out that much of Gandhi's struggles were confined against the British and the latter allowed him to do so and that he could never really grasp the nature of modern totalitarianism. His method would fail in more difficult situations. Orwell's point is articulated by Mehrotra too when he mentions that "the subjects of the British Empire enjoy many more civil liberties and they have greater scope for the practice of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and satyagraha, without being branded and shot as rebels, than the subjects of any other empire in the world, both past and present" (Mehrotra, 1979, p.145). Gandhi has to be analysed from the particular to the general rather than the general to the particular. Woodcock rightly observed that, "It was perhaps of Gandhi's knowledge of the British and his skillful use of their concepts of decency as levers to move their consciences that made him so much the man for the time in India" (Woodcock, 1971, p.114).

## VII. CONCLUSION

Gandhi understood that no society could possibly endure in a good and meaningful way by denying individual freedom. This emphasis on the primacy of the individual led him to reject total state control for he considered it to be a person's



highermoral obligation to promote common rather than aspire for mere political power. His writings as a critic of the modern society would endure just as Rousseau's have endured for the last three centuries. Even in matters of practical utility, Gandhi's dictums remain relevant. His amazing capacity to build an all-Indian organisation, the Indian National Congress, which he sustained for the next three decades since 1920, ought to awaken us to the fact that our major failure in present times is organizational. Hegel makes an interesting point when he asserted that the world historic individuals reflect in them the real spirit of the age. Greatness and relevance of great persons, accordingly, have to be judged in the time frame of their lives and circumstances. Gandhi is no exception to the rule. He continues to hold the interest of present historians for his amazing achievement during his own lifetime in convincing the majority of the British population that imperialism and colonialism were morally wrong. Detractors normally overlook this unparalleled achievement when they blame him for many of our ills both during his lifetime and thereafter. Gandhi's nondeterministic and skeptical outlook, based on his individualized scientific method of seeking the truth, allowed him to arrive at a larger consensus on the basis of individual judgment. Gandhi demonstrated that the Indians were capable of matching the British capacity of providing a unified administrative structure. He duplicated the British model of self-identity by indigenous dress, language and accountability and with a democratic process of electioneering in which no single individual became absolutely powerful or indispensable. George Orwell, writing on Gandhi, points out that Gandhi's "whole life was sort of pilgrimage in which every act was significant and that he enriched the world by being alive". What is revealing about Gandhi is the queer combination of a saint or a near saint with a very competent but shrewd person who could have been a very successful lawyer, administrator or businessman. Orwell does not mention the familiar things associated with Gandhi: home-spun cloth, soul-force, vegetarianism and dismisses these as medieval with little or no relevance in a backward and overpopulated country. Orwell mentions that the British officials liked and admired Gandhi because he could not be blamed for corruption, ambition in the bad sense and for the fact that his actions could not be attributed either to fear or to malice. He had no sense of inferiority and acted with the conviction that men act in good faith and that every single individual with genuine goodness makes it possible to approach every other single person. Gandhi believed in human equality and never thought in terms of race or status. His technique of Satyagraha is a method of defeating the enemy without preaching hatred. Many of Gandhi's ideas have found resonance in the West and elsewhere particularly among the peace activists, environmental groups and feminists. His technique of non-violent civil disobedience has many adherents like Martin Luther King Jr., Bertrand Russell, Corazano Aquino, Petra Kelly and Vaclav Havel. Moreover the conduct of a theoretical discourse on the subject has been within the framework that he furnishes. A good example is Rawls' discussion of the subject in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Gandhi makes Indians develop a deep pride in their heritage, customs and traditions, absorbing whatever are worth respecting and to eschew those that retard progress and moral upliftment.

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