



LITERATURE IN EARLY ĀNDHRADĒŚA

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In the present article an attempt is made on the basis of Primary sources to throw some light on the literary works in early Āndhradēśa i.e. the dynastic families like Śātavāhanās, Ikshvākūs, Pallavās, Brihatphalāyanās, Ānanda-gōtras, Śālankāyanās, and Vishnukundis.

The region of Āndhradēśa corresponding broadly to present day Andhra Pradesh witnessed rich literary activity from early times. The literary activity during this period was shaped by interactions between *Prākṛit*, *Sanskrit* and early *Telugu* and was deeply connected to the religious, political and social developments of that period. *Pāli*, a form of *Prākṛit* became the language of *Buddhism* and *Prākṛit* of *Jainism*. All the early Buddhist writings were in *Pāli*. *Prākṛit* was the dominant language, both inscriptional and literary. It became a popular literary idiom¹ *Prākṛit* became almost the lingua franca of India under Aśōka. The Aśōkan Edicts of Dhānyakata, Rājulamandagiri and Yerragudi as well as the Bhaṭṭiprōlu inscriptions are in *Prākṛit* and in the southern variant of *Brahmi* script. Especially, the Buddhists cultivated *Prākṛit* and Jains adopted *Ardhamāgadhi* variety of *Prākṛit*. *Ardhamāgadhi* means half-Māgadhi, i.e. a dialect closely related to *Māgadhi* (modern day Bihar). The Jain *Āgamās*, the canonical texts of *Jainism*, are composed in this language. It is an important middle Indo-Aryan language that holds a significant place in the history of Indian languages, literature and religions particularly *Jainism* and *Buddhism*. *Ardhamāgadhi* was the language of Jain scriptures, especially those of the *Svetāmbara* sect. Literally means, half-Māgadhi (from *Ardha*=half, and *Māgadhi*= of Magadha).

The Andhra Buddhists had their own versions of the *Vinaya*, *Abhidhamma Pīṭikās*, *Digha* and *Majjhima Nikayās*.² The *Jataka* literature was also popular in Andhra as revealed by the *Amarāvati* sculptures. The *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the *Mahāvastu* which is the *Vinaya* of the *Lōkōttaravādins* had originated in the *vihārās* of Āndhradēśa. Later, the famous Theravada exegetist *Buddhaghōṣa* of about the 4th c. C. E. composed commentaries on the *Tripīṭikās* and his magnumopus, *Visuddhimagga* (path of purification) is in *Prākṛit*.³ Although, *Pāli*

is more associated with *Theravada Buddhism*, early *Buddhism* also acknowledges *Māgadhi* as the language of the Buddha's speech.

Āndhradēśa was a major centre of *Theravada* and *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. *Amarāvati* and *Nāgārjunakōṇḍa* in Guntur district were prominent Buddhist centers with literary activity. While most Buddhist texts were composed in *Pāli*, *Sanskrit*, and many were transmitted or composed in *Prākṛit* dialects. Jain monks travelled through Āndhradēśa and composed texts in *Prākṛit*. The early *Purāṇic* traditions and ritual literature began gaining ground by the end of this period.

The language and script of the inscriptions in early Āndhradēśa are:

Erragudi Edict⁴ and *Amarāvati* fragmentary pillar inscription⁵ of Aśōka (3rd c. B.C. E.) are written in *Brahmi* script.

Bhaṭṭiprōlu relic casket inscription⁶ of Kubēraka belonged to 3rd – 2nd c. B. C. E. written in *Prākṛit* and the script is southern *Brahmi*.

Guntupalli (West Godavari) pillar inscription⁷ issued by the Sada king of Mahāmēghavāhana dynasty, dated to 2nd – 1st c. B.C.E. written in *Prākṛit* language and *Brahmi* script.



Nāgārjunakōṇḍa inscription⁸ of Vijaya Śātakarni dated to 2nd c. C. E. written in *Prākṛit* language and southern *Brahmi* script.

Another inscription⁹ from Nāgārjunakōṇḍa belonged to Vīrapurushadatta of Ikshvāku dynasty dated 3rd c. C. E. is written in *Prākṛit* language and *Brahmi* script.

Phanigiri inscription of Rudrapurushadatta, Ikshvāku king dated 4th c. C.E. is written in *Sanskrit* and *Prākṛit* languages and *Brahmi* script.¹⁰

Kōṇḍamudi plates¹¹ of Jayavarman belonged to Brihatphalāyana family written in *Prākṛit* and in the Archaic *Telugu-Kannada* characters of 4th c. C.E.

Eluru grant¹² of Śālankāyana Dēvavarman dated early 4th c. C. E. and Kānukōllu plates¹³ of Śālankāyana Nandivarman dated 4th c. C. E. written in *Prākṛit* language and Archaic *Telugu-Kannada* script.

Tummalagudēm plates¹⁴ of Vishnukundī Gōvindavarman dated 5th c. C.E. and Chikkulla plates¹⁵ of Vikramēndravarman II dated, 6th c. C. E. are written in the *Sanskrit* language and Archaic *Telugu-Kannada* script.

Maṭṭēpāḍu plates¹⁶ Dēvavarman of Ānanda-gōtra is composed in *Sanskrit* mixed with *Prākṛit* and written in Archaic *Telugu-Kannada* characters of 4th-5th c. C. E.

Mayidavōlu plates¹⁷ of Śivaskandavarman dated 4th c. C.E., Pikira grant¹⁸ dated 5th c. C.E. and Vīlavatti grant¹⁹ dated middle of 5th c. C. E. belonged to Pallava

Prākṛit was very popular among the masses during the Śātavāhana rule, besides a number of *dēśabhāshās*. Eighteen *dēśabhāshās* were mentioned by Kautilya, Vatsāyana, and Bharata, of which the Andhra is one. As the political power in the Andhra region was wielded by a *Prākṛit* speaking dynasty, the language of the country was naturally subjected to the influence of *Prākṛit*, the language of the rulers. As already mentioned that in the inscriptions of Śātavāhanās was all in *Prākṛit* language. The only record which is considered by some scholars to have been written in Telugu language is *Nāgabū*.²⁰ It seems to be an incomplete record in which the scribe might not have engraved the last letter *dhi*. Thus, it becomes a *Prākṛit* word *Nāgabūdhi*. The successors of Śātavāhanās continued the tradition for some decades. But their characters disclose to a gradual change from *Prākṛit* to *Sanskrit*. We hear from Rajasekara's *Kāvya Mīmāṃsa*, that Kuntala Śātakarni ordered for the use of *Prākṛit* even by the ladies of his harem.

Hāla, the Śātavāhana king, was the gifted poet, who created that gem of poetry in *Prākṛit*, *Gāthāsaptasati*, which Bana praised: *avinasinam agramyam akarotsatavahana*, Śātavāhana wrote an immortal classic work.²¹ The most important *Prākṛit* work *Gāthāsaptasati* of Hāla was the most beautiful poetic composition of those times mentioned *vēdic* rituals and Gautama Buddha, the two opposite pillars only once. That shows the poets and artists at the time of Hāla were steering, a middle course avoiding the extremes. The theme of cultural eroticism that runs throughout *Gātha*, also indicates attachment to life and all its pleasures and not ascetism and negation.²² It is a collection of 700 erotic and romantic verses, mostly composed in *Mahārāshtri Prākṛit*. Themes include love, longing and nature, often with rural and folk imagery. The evidence of this work is overwhelmingly in favour of the marriage of well developed and grown-up girls. The exchange of the love letters between a girl, and her lover support this view. Dr. K. Kamala points out that the love letter described in *Gāthāsaptasati* seems to be the earliest ever recorder love letter in Indian literature.

In some cases the love affairs did not consummate in marriage due obviously to the betrayal of the youth.²³ It is a famous anthology of *Mahārāshtri Prākṛit* love poems, compiled by the king Hāla, a ruler of the Śātavāhana dynasty, who ruled over parts of modern day Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra. It is one of the earliest known secular poetic works in Indian literature. It focuses on rural life, emotions, and relationships-often between lovers, wives, and husbands. It emphasizes women's voices-many poems are composed from a female perspective. Unlike *Sanskrit* epics, these are short, lyrical and deeply personal. Though Hāla ruled in the Andhra region *Gāthāsaptasati* is in *Prākṛit*, not in *Telugu* or *Sanskrit*.



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It shows the intermingling of regional languages and cultures during that time. *Līlāvati* is another *Prākṛit* work which narrates a romantic episode of king Hāla. *Līlāvati* literally means playful or graceful woman. Based on its references, *Līlāvati* was probably a narrative poem or romantic story,²⁴ possibly a *ketha* (storytelling) work in verse form. The attribution to Hāla is not fully confirmed but accepted in some traditional sources. If *Līlāvati* was indeed his composition, it further emphasizes Hāla's deep interest in romantic and courtly literature.

The preference of the Śātavāhanās to *Brāhmanism* gradually replaced *Prākṛit* by *Sanskrit* at the court. *Vēdic* studies were encouraged and theological literature with its fascinating mythology became widely popular. Sarvavarman, Hāla's courtier to teach *Sanskrit* to Hāla. Sarvavarman, in turn, by the grace of Kumara produced the grammar *Kātantra*, a *Sanskrit* was only a classic literary expression and hence rarely found in the inscriptions of the Śātavāhanās. Even Buddhist thinkers like Āchārya Nāgārjuna and Āryadēva composed their philosophical works in *Sanskrit*. Especially to Āchārya Nāgārjuna goes the credit of developing the style of *karika* which is *sutra* and *vyākhyā* by the same author which is well-suited for philosophical writings.²⁵

It was from the time of Yajña Śrī, we find the use of *Sanskrit*,²⁶ in epigraphs of Telugus (Andhras). A remarkable piece of evidence in this regard was found on their unique silver portrait coins of Gautamīputra Śātakarni. These silver coins were proto-types of the white currency issued by the Western Kshatrapās. Though, they were after the foreign examples, they are distinct and indigenous in their portrait depiction and legends. The royal busts are in traditional Indian style and

the legends contained customary matronymics, unlike the patronymics of the *karddamakas*. The Śākās used the *Kharosthi-Brahmi* and Greek (triscriptural) and issued bilingual (*Sanskrit* and *Prākṛit*) legends; the Śātavāhanās used *Brahmi* on both sides (uniscriptural) and issued the legend in *Prākṛit* and early *Telugu*.²⁷

Gunādhyā²⁸ of *Brihatkatha* (literally means great story) is said to be the minister of a Śātavāhana king. *Brihatkatha* is one of the most fascinating and mysterious works in ancient Indian literature. It was originally written in a lost dialect called *Paiśāci Prākṛit*, which was a vernacular language, often associated with non-Āryan or tribal groups. It was a collection of tales of adventure, romance, intrigue, magic and moral lessons, interwoven with rich story telling. It includes mythical creatures, heroic exploits, and fantastical journeys, making it a key part of Indian story telling tradition. The story of Gunādhyā proves beyond doubt that *Prākṛit* was more popular than *Sanskrit* during Śātavāhana rule and that some kings did not understand even the rudiments of *Sanskrit*. Śātavāhana ruler in question turned towards *Sanskrit* because of the taunting of his queen, well versed in *Sanskrit* and Gunādhyā wrote his ocean of stories in *Paiśāchi*, a form of *Prākṛit* understood by one and all. Out of innumerable inscriptions of the Śātavāhanās, these is only a solitary one in *Sanskrit* viz., the Nasik inscription a mixture of *Sanskrit* and *Pāli*, composed by one who wished to write in *Sanskrit*, but didn't know the language quite in the form which was finally given to it by the great grammarians and other authors.²⁹ Gunādhyā burnt his work written in due to lack of royal patronage. This indicates two points. One, *Sanskrit*, and *Prākṛit* were gaining ascendancy over *Paiśāci* in the royal court. Second, the era of devils, goblins and souls in the religious culture of tribal men was vanishing, giving place to *Brāhmanism* of the *Bhāgavata* devotional type and *Buddhism*.³⁰

Although the original is lost, *Sanskrit* adaptations like: *Kathāsarisāgara* by Somadeva and *Brihatkathāmanjari* by Kshemendra preserve its spirit and stories. Kshemendra's work greatly influenced later Indian narrative literature. The Śātavāhana dynasty was a golden age for early vernacular literature, particularly in *Prākṛit*. The contributions of king Hāla and the influence of Gunādhyā shaped the

foundations of classical Indian storytelling and secular poetic tradition, marking a key stage in the evolution of Indian literature before the rise of *Sanskrit* dominance.

Sarvavarman, Hāla's courtier to teach *Sanskrit* to Hāla. Sarvavarman, in turn, by the grace of Kumara produced the grammar *Kātantra*, a *Sanskrit* was only a classic literary expression and hence rarely found in the inscriptions of the Śātavāhanās. It was from the time of Yajña Śrī, we find the use of *Sanskrit*,³¹ in epigraphs of Telugus (Andhras). A remarkable piece of evidence in this regard was found on their unique silver portrait coins of Gautamīputra Śātakarni. These



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silver coins were proto-types of the white currency issued by the Western Kshatrapās. Though, they were after the foreign examples, they are distinct and indigenous in their portrait depiction and legends. The royal busts are in traditional Indian style and the legends contained customary matrynomics, unlike the patronymics of the *karddamakas*. The Śākās used the *Kharosthi-Brahmi* and Greek (triscriptural) and issued bilingual (*Sanskrit* and *Prākṛit*) legends; the Śātavāhanās used *Brahmi* on both sides (unscriptural and issued the legend in *Prākṛit* and early *Telugu*.³² Āchārya Nāgārjuna was one of the greatest philosophers and scholars of ancient India. He is regarded as the founder of the *Mādhyamika* School of *Mahāyāna Buddhism* and is often called the second Buddha. His teachings greatly influenced not only in India but also in Tibet, China, and Japan. He associated with Śātavāhana kings and serving as an advisor of king Yajña Śrī Śātakarni. Nāgārjuna's famous works are *Ratnāvali*, *Suhṛllēkha*, etc. Even Buddhist thinkers like Āchārya Nāgārjuna and Āryadēva composed their philosophical works in Sanskrit. The Tibetan writers described Nāgārjuna, Āryadēva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga and Dharmakīrti as the six gems that adorn Bharatavarsh and the Andhras may justly feel proud that no less than four of the six are associated with their land. The creative genius of Andhra Buddhists was not limited to literary achievements. The local Megalithic culture assumed new significance with the advent of Buddhism and on its traditions huge *Chaityās* were built, each of which was a great feat of engineering skill. The *stūpa* of Dhānyakataka with its great dimensions and handsome sculptures has won praise

as the most magnificent monument in the Amarāvati sculpture stands unrivalled in the entire range of Indian plastic art and subsequent periods in the art history of Andhra have nothing comparable to them.³³

These coin types primarily meant to proclaim their nativity to the conquered territories in respect of both the royal houses. Although, the Śātavāhanās issues contained *Telugu* legend on the reverse and minted them in Andhra region (Nāgārjunakōṇḍa), they were (as is the case with the Śāka issues), not meant for Telugu speaking subjects but too far off western and northern provinces of their vast Empire.³⁴

Besides, *Prākṛit* and *Sanskrit*, there was *dēśi* which means native language and was current among the local people. Gunādhyā made a reference to it in his *Bṛihatkātha*. It should have been the parent of the South Indian languages like *Telugu* and *Kannada*. The *Gāthāśaptasatī* contains many such *dēśi* terms. The bilingual silver coins of the later Śātavāhanās corroborate the evidence as to the existence of *dēśi* as a separate language.³⁵

The early *Telugu* works *Arahanaku* (*sa* and *ha* inter-changed), *Makanaku* and *Tiru* are found. The rulers of the Śātavāhanakula, we could set an earliest instance of a *Telugu* sentence that too in verse giving an inkling of the then extent of *Telugu* language in a predominantly *Prākṛit* era. Śātavāhana kings never exercised any bigotry either in religion or language. Hāla, the poet king extended his patronage to *Tamil*, Nannur Mayilainathan Urai says that the *Tamil* work *Śātavāhanam* was named the patron of the author.³⁶

The Ikshvāku kings continued the Śātavāhana tradition of promoting *Prākṛit*. Their support helped to preserve and propagate early Buddhist texts, oral traditions, and scholarly commentaries, especially in Andhra and Telangana regions. Although, the Ikshvākūś themselves are not known to have authored texts, they played a crucial role in patronizing literature, religious scholarship and educational institutions. Their rule was notable for its cultural, religious and architectural contributions, especially to *Buddhism*. Nāgārjunakōṇḍa was a great centre of Buddhist learning and monastic culture during Ikshvāku rule. Likely, it

was a home to Buddhist scholars who composed and taught *Pāli* and *Prākṛit* texts. The *Ārya Sangha* (noble monastic community) thrived under their patronage. Dinnaga, the father of Indian logic is known to have lived near Vengi, probably in the Guntupalli *viḥāra* and composed his famous work on logic; *Pramāṇa Samuccaya*.³⁷ *Sanskrit* language was used in the inscriptions for the first by Ēhūvala Śāntamūla towards the end of third c. C. E. One of the earliest carvings showing a scribe at work, with a stylus in his hand, scratching lines of text in beautiful letters on a palm-leaf, is probably from Nāgārjunakōṇḍa where astrological calculations concerning prince Siddhartha's birth are recorded.³⁸



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While the Śāṅkāyanās were not known for extensive direct literary contributions, they played a transitional but significant role in supporting Sanskritization and Brāhmanical revival in South Indian dynasties to issue inscriptions in *Sanskrit* language. These records reflected a high level of literary refinement, showing the growing influence of classical *Sanskrit* poetry and prose. *Prasastis* (eulogies) in these records often initiated Kālidāsa style of poetry and were influenced by Gupta period literary standards. Although no specific works are directly attributed to Śāṅkāyana authors, the period supported the transmission of *vēdic* literature and early *Purānic* texts. Prominence of *Vaishnavism* likely led to the promotion of texts like the *Vishnu Purāna* and related *Smṛiti* literature. The Śāṅkāyanās patronized Brāhmins and *vēdic* scholars, likely supported *gurukulās* and temple-based learning centers, where *Sanskrit* scriptures, grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) and early poetics were taught.

Though the Ānanda-gōtrika king's political power was limited compared to their predecessors, they played important role in continuing cultural and literary traditions in early South India. During their rule *Prākṛit* was the main language of administration and literature. *Sanskrit* was not yet widely used for inscriptions. Buddhists and Brāhmanical scholars were helping to preserve old texts and inspire new literary works. They encouraged Brāhmanical education and *vēdic* studies, which led to the composition and preservation of *Sanskrit* hymns and commentaries. The kings supported monasteries and encouraged the copying and

teaching of Buddhist scriptures like *Jātaka* stories, *Dhammapāda* commentaries, etc.

The Pallava kings made vital contributions to Indian literature, especially in *Sanskrit* and *Tamil*. The early inscriptions and royal records were composed in *Prākṛit* (Mydavolu and *Hirahadagalli* inscriptions). Later inscriptions and literary works show the increasing the use of *Sanskrit*. Many poets and scholars flourished under their rule.

Vishnukundi rulers were great patrons of learning, and literature. Their rule marks an important stage in the literary and cultural history of South India. *Prākṛit* was also used in the early phase. *Sanskrit* was the language of administration, learning and religious discourse. This period likely saw the promotion of *vēdic* studies, *Pūrānic* literature, and *Shaiva* texts. Gōvidavarman I was himself a poet, and a master of many treatises and encouraged scholars. Vikramendraverman I was himself a poet. Gōvindavarman II was a learned monarch, well versed in the Buddhist scriptures and all the *śāstrās*. Madhavavarma IV Janāśraya encouraged scholars and was the patron of the author Ganasvāmin who named his work *Chhandovichiti* after the title of his benefactor, viz., *Janāśraya*.³⁹ Of the ritualistic literature only the *Āpastamba-sūtra* finds mention. Telugu began to emerge, though full-fledged Telugu literature developed later. Amarāvati and Indrapālanagara became the centers' of literary and religious activity. Inscriptions in *Prākṛit*, *Sanskrit*, and *Telugu* give us valuable information about rulers, donations, and religious practices. These records use highly ornate *Sanskrit*, reflecting the literary style of the time and indicating the role of court poets and scholars. The inscriptions themselves are a form of literary expression, often containing poetic flourished and metaphors. The court likely supported classical *Sanskrit* poets and *Mahākāvya*s i. e. *Epic* poems, though specific authors from this dynasty are not well known. They were contemporaries of the Gupta period in North India, so Kalidasa's and Bharavi's influence might have extended southward. While *Telugu* literature in written form fully flourished later (from 11th c. C. E.), this period likely saw the oral transmission of *Telugu* stories and songs. Chikkulla plates brought with *Sanskrit* mixed with *Prākṛit* words. That the writer's vernacular was *Telugu* is proved by the ending of the word *Samvassarambul* for *Samvatsarah* in line 26; *ya-rājya-samvassa (tsa) rambul 10 masa-pakkam 8gihma*

5.⁴⁰ At Keesaragutta, very near the western gateway, there is a small label inscribed in archaic *Telugu*, datable to Vishnukundi period, whose characters exactly resemble those found in the copper plate inscriptions of the period of Madhavavarman II. The label reads as *Tulachuvaanru*- a purely *Telugu* term which means carvers or engravers or scoopers. By these *Telugu* words and many others found in Vishnukundis charters such as Ravireru, Lenduluru, Penakaparru, it is evident that *Telugu* had evolved in its various forms during the Vishnukundis rule and it was they, who first patronized the *Telugu* language.⁴¹ Telugu verses must have been in vogue during the reign of Vishnukundi kings, but they did not get a place in the literature of the time.



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Early dynasties like the Śātavāhanās, Ikshvākūs, Vishnukundi and Pallavās in Āndhradēśa patronized art, music and dance. Dance was an important form of religious and cultural expression. Dance in early Āndhradēśa was associated with religious worship and temple rituals. Temples served as centers for dance and music performances, especially during festivals and special occasions. Inscriptions from Amarāvati, Nāgārjunakōṇḍa, Jaggayyapēta and Guntupalli mentioned that the women associated with dance and music in temples. Amarāvati, Nāgārjunakōṇḍa, and Ghantaśāla *stūpās* provide rich evidence of dance in early period. The sculptures from these places show dancers in various poses, indicating refined artistic knowledge of body movement and rhythm. The earliest literary work that reflects the culture of Andhras is Hālā's *Gāthāsaptasati* of first c. C. E. In this work there are references to the dance familiar to Andhras of Śātavāhana period. This reference attests the fact. *The field of blossomed jute looked like a female dancers in makeup*. This example with a simile to a dancer establishes that the Andhras of the Śātavāhana period were familiar with dance. Another important treatise to be mentioned along with *Gāthāsaptasati* is Bharata's *Nāṭyāśāstra* which also dates back to first c. C. E. It can be understood that by this time itself a fully fledged dance system evolved in South India. Bharata observes that Andhras are southerners by nature and southerners are lowers of a variety of *nṛitya*, *gita*, *vādyā* and *lalitābhinaya*. He adds that these people used a sub language *Andhri* in dance and that *Andhri* is one variety of ragas among the eleven varieties prevalent in the centrally located village in the south. Taking these facts into consideration, it can be stated that Andhras achieved significant development in the sphere of dance by first c. C. E. itself. The treatise next to *Nāṭyāśāstra* which deserves attention in this

connection is *Abhinayadarpanam* by Nandikesrara. This work is source for the *Kuchipudi* dance which is popular dance variety of the Andhra Pradesh today. It was written in third c. C. E. Almost all the available copies of the work are in *Telugu* script, from this it is reasonable to assume that its author Nandikesrara belonged to Andhra. The archaeological evidences at Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakōṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh brought to light a number of sculptured pieces which provide ample evidence for the developed art of dance in Āndhradēśa prior to the Chālukya period.⁴² Śātavāhana kings like Gautamīputra Śātakarni and Vasistīputra Pulumāvi patronized art and culture, including dance. Ikshvāku kings encouraged dance, evident from the Nāgārjunakōṇḍa sculptures. Vishnukundi kings continued this tradition in the *Saiva* and *Vaishnava* temples.

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