

Suicide in India

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Abstract

Suicide is often seen as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. 601 farmers in Maharashtra committed suicide in the first three months of 2015. Although psychiatric disorders are often associated with suicide in the West, in developing countries social, economic and cultural factors must be considered when attempting to explain the high rates of the impulsive and stress-related suicides. Although suicide is a deeply personal act, suicidal behaviour is determined by a number of individual and social factors. Suicide is a multifaceted problem and hence suicide prevention programmes should also be multidimensional. Since life is a gift from God, we should treat all human life including their own with love and respect.

Keywords:

Farmer suicide, psychiatric disorders, suicide rates, suicidal behavior, attempted suicide, sanctity of human life, right to life

Cited as: Thayil, Jose. (2015). Suicide in India. Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan-June 2015(18/1), 102–118. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4163607>

Introduction

601 farmers in Maharashtra committed suicide in the first three months of 2015. This works out to a chilling statistic of almost seven farmer suicides every day, according to the state government's own figures. Out of these 319 were from Vidarbha and 215 from Marathwada regions. These regions are the worst hit by drought and unseasonal rains. Vidarbha region consists of 97321 Sq. KMs which constitute 31.6% of the total area of Maharashtra. Since there are 90 Lac farmers in the state, the state's Rs. 4000 crore drought relief package amounts to Rs 1875 per acre. This amount is too little compared to the loss the farmers have suffered due to drought. The low price of farm products is one of the major reasons for their sad predicament. According to one of the farmers, Mr. Tiwari: "It costs Rs. 6800 to grow a quintal of cotton. The sale price fixed by the government is Rs. 4000. Even without a drought, farmers were in debt." In 2014 the total number of farmer suicides in the state was 1981. In spite of the state government giving top priority to prevention of farmer suicides this year, the figure has already reached in three months about 30% of last year's figure. The unseasonal rains in the recent past are going to make things worse for the farmers.¹

Definition of suicide by Merriam-Webster dictionary is, "the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind." A more elaborate definition of suicide is given by Fairbairn: "Suicide is an act, whether of commission or omission, and whether performed by himself or other, by means of which an individual autonomously intends and wishes to bring about his death because he wants to be dead or wants to die the death he enacts."²

According to sources from World health Organization, in 1999, China had the highest number of suicides with 195,000 and the second comes India with 87,000.³ The average global suicide rate is 14.5 deaths per 100,000 people, with suicide being the 4th leading cause of death in the 15-19 age group.. Suicide has become an important issue in India in the recent past. More than one hundred thousand people commit suicide every year in our

country. Lithuania has the highest rate of suicide (38.4). In the last two decades, the suicide rate in India has increased from 7.9 to 10.3 per 100,000. It is estimated that one in 60 persons in our country are affected by suicide. It includes both those who have attempted suicide and those who have been affected by the suicide of a close family member or friend. Thus, suicide is a major mental health problem, which demands urgent action.⁴

There is a wide variation in the suicide rates within the country. According to sources from World health Organization, in 1999 the suicide rate in Pondicherry (UT) is 58.3, Kerala 30.5, Karnataka 24.2, Tamil Nadu 18.6, Punjab 4.2, Uttar Pradesh 3.3, Bihar 1.8, Jammu & Kashmir 1, etc.⁵ The southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have a suicide rate of more than 15 while in the Northern States of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir, the suicide rate is less than 3 per 100,000. This variable pattern has been stable for the last twenty years. Higher literacy, a better reporting system, lower external aggression, higher socio-economic status and higher expectations could be some of the possible explanations for the higher suicide rates in the southern states. 71% of suicides in India are committed by persons below the age of 44 years. Poisoning (36.6%), hanging (32.1%) and self-immolation (7.9%) are the common methods used to commit suicide.⁶ Suicide by self-immolation is found to be more common in India than in other countries and more among females than males. In general the suicide ratio among males and females is 2:1.

After someone commits suicide, people who are close to him/her feel that they have failed their brother, sister, friend, child or partner. They are shocked and paralyzed. It is the family members who suffer the long trauma a suicide causes. Some family members feel so embarrassed and ashamed that they no longer want to meet their friends or even go out and socialize.⁷

If at a particular moment person see no other option but suicide, their vision and perception have already become flawed and distorted. At that moment they are not able to think clearly or calculate the consequences of their action. They only want to put an end to the immediate problem that they are facing. They feel

that nothing can be done to redeem the situation. The words of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27: 46), tells us the deep anguish and despair that Jesus went through before his death on the cross. But Jesus was able to think of entrusting his mother to John, asking God to forgive his tormentors and promising paradise to one of the thieves who was crucified with him. This kind of thinking is quite different from the thinking that goes on in the minds of those who are contemplating suicide. Their minds are preoccupied with the thought of death in order to escape from a greater calamity.⁸

Causes for Suicide

Although psychiatric disorders are often associated with suicide in the West, in developing countries social, economic and cultural factors must be considered when attempting to explain the high rates of the impulsive and stress-related suicides. Apparently there is a widespread ‘acceptability’ of suicide in our society. Many people seem to accept suicide as an option when faced with extreme mental distress.⁹ Taking away one’s life had religious acceptability in Buddhism and Hinduism. In fact the practice of “Sati” was accepted and is still accepted in some circles of Hindu society.

Most of the studies note that around 90% of those who die by suicide have a mental disorder. According to a government report, only 4.74% of suicides in the country are due to mental disorders. This discrepancy is due to the fact that only 10% of those who committed suicide had ever seen a mental health professional. Government report will take into consideration only those who are certified by a mental health professional. Countless experts have found that affective disorders are the most important causes related to suicide. Majority of people committed suicide during their very first episode of depression, and more than 60% of the depressive suicides had only mild to moderate depression. About 8% of suicides in India are committed by persons suffering from schizophrenia. Studies show that the male to female ratio for schizophrenic suicides is more or less equal.

Unfortunately mental health services are inadequate to meet the needs of our country. For a population of over a billion, there are only about 3,500 psychiatrists.¹⁰ This is due mainly to two factors. One is the lack of financial resources to offer mental health facilities to mental patients. Secondly many patients or their relatives don't want to admit that they need psychiatric help. Therefore they don't make use of the available facilities in the country.

Although suicide is a deeply personal act, suicidal behaviour is determined by a number of individual and social factors. According to the official data, the reason for 43% of suicides is unknown while illness and family problems are believed to be the reason for about 44% of suicides. Divorce, dowry, love affairs, cancellation of marriage or the inability to get married (according to the system of arranged marriages in India), illegitimate pregnancy, extra-marital affairs and such conflicts relating to the issue of marriage play a crucial role, particularly in the suicide of women, in India. Poverty, unemployment, debts and educational problems are also contributing to suicide. The recent spate of farmers' suicides in India has raised societal and governmental concern to address this growing tragedy. Alcohol dependence and abuse were found in 35% of suicides. Around 30-50% of male suicides were under the influence of alcohol and many wives have been driven to suicide by their alcoholic husbands.¹¹

The media sometimes gives undue importance and publicity to a suicide committed for a particular cause or to the death of a celebrity. When a popular film star or politician dies someone commits suicide and it creates a chain reaction of many more suicides in different parts of the state or country. When the Mandal Commission recommended 27% reservation for OBCs (other backward castes) and Scheduled Tribes in government jobs, it created unrest in the student community and a student committed self-immolation in front of a group of people protesting against such a reservation. This was sensationalized, glamorized and widely publicized by the media. This led to many more self-immolations in different parts of the country.¹ The sad part is that media does not take up the broader issues of suicide or deal with the importance of suicide prevention.

“In India, the high rate of suicide among young adults can be associated with greater socio-economic stressors that have followed rapid urbanization, industrialization, liberalization of the economy and privatization leading to the loss of job security, huge disparities in incomes and the inability to meet role obligations in the present society.”¹³ The breakdown of the joint family system, mainly due to migration to cities for job opportunities, that had previously provided emotional support and stability is also seen as an important causal factor in suicides in India.

Suicide Prevention

Some believe that suicide cannot be prevented because its major determinants are social and environmental factors such as discrimination against women, caste discrimination, unemployment, floods, droughts, etc. over which people don't have much control. Due to the breakdown of joint family system, the individuals don't get family support in times of stress.

Hence, there is an emerging need for external emotional support. The enormity of the problem combined with the paucity of mental health service has led to the emergence of NGOs in the field of suicide prevention. Some Catholic institutions are also actively involved in this field in recent years. These NGOs provide support to suicidal individuals by befriending them and encouraging them to seek professional help if needed.¹⁴

In India, attempted suicide was a punishable offence under section 309 of the Indian Penal Code which states: “whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such an offense shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with a fine or with both”. However, the aim of the law to prevent suicide by legal means has proved to be counter-productive. Emergency care to those who have attempted suicide was denied as many hospitals and practitioners hesitated to provide the needed treatment fearful of legal hassles. The actual data on attempted suicides was difficult to obtain as many cases were reported as accidents in order to avoid police case and court procedures.¹⁵ In 2014 Government of India decided to repeal the law and now attempted suicide is not punishable according to the Indian penal

code. The reason for repealing the law could be that human beings love their life so much that only some very exceptional individuals will opt to end their life because of very difficult situations. Love of life is implanted in each one of us and it is a characteristic of every human being. Therefore suicide cannot become very dangerous to society like normal crimes.¹⁶ Any establishment of relationship presupposes that we love ourselves before we start loving others for their sake.

Suicide is a multifaceted problem and hence suicide prevention programmes should also be multidimensional. Collaboration, coordination, cooperation and commitment are needed to develop and implement a national plan, which is cost-effective, appropriate and relevant to the needs of the community. In India, suicide prevention should take into consideration economic and social factors along with mental disorders.¹⁷ Parents, close relatives and friends need to affirm and nourish emotional well-being of those who are very close to them. If parents don't welcome their children after they are found committing some blunders or facing failures, they would feel that they have no other place to go or no one else to turn to. When people say that they don't want to live, they are actually looking for love, acceptance, appreciation and affirmation. That is why we all should seriously take our responsibility to affirm our love and concern for those who are close to us. This needs to be done not just once, but on a regular basis, if we want our loved ones to feel secure and wanted. Priests and sisters who want to help close relatives of the one who committed suicide must be compassionate, gentle, non-judgmental and understanding. In spite of the fact of someone in the family committing suicide, they must be able to project a God who is compassionate and non-judgmental and must provide hope for the grievers. Family members could be invited to be part of the planning for the funeral liturgy that can address their loss and their grief.¹⁸

Sanctity of Life

If suicide is morally wrong in some cases, is it morally wrong in all cases? There are people who sacrifice their life for a noble cause, a principle or their faith. There are also spies who kill

themselves after being caught by the enemies, so that they don't give out the secrets of their nation under torture. High-risk jobs, such as bomb-disposal, are considered borderline cases. There are also volunteers who risk their lives in times of calamities like floods, earthquakes, epidemics, etc. Their actions seem morally right because of the selflessness of the act. In high-risk activities one may argue that death is a highly possible consequence but not really intended. These noble deaths are often admired by society while other types of suicides are often looked down upon. Can we separate the morality of these two types of suicides? Hume says that if one's life is not one's own it is just as "criminal...to put it in danger, as well as to dispose of it". Both have the intention of self-termination. The spy kills himself because of his love for his motherland but the teenager kills himself because he cannot endure the tensions of his life. Suicide is often seen as the act of a desperate or mentally unstable person. The purpose of suicide seems to make a difference.¹⁹

All human beings, especially Christians, believe in the sanctity of human life. Christians believe that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). St. Paul reminds us that God's Spirit dwells in us. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's Temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor 2:16). This means that people are in some way reflections of God. Christians believe that God creates every human life with love and care. Therefore everyone's life is valuable and important, whether they are in the womb, new-born, handicapped, sick, elderly, mentally or physically challenged, mentally disturbed, unemployed, debt-ridden farmers, sinners, etc. So Christians should treat all human life including their own with love and respect. Our belief in the sanctity of life should influence our decisions on euthanasia, suicide and life support. The respect for life should extend to all other forms of life because we are related to everything in this universe. "Our current lack of respect for the Earth constitutes an injustice perpetrated against generations to come. They will be condemned to live within a damaged world, depleted of many natural resources."²⁰ The growing ecological awareness among the people should motivate us to commit ourselves to protect the earth with all that it contains.

This could alleviate some of the problems faced by the farmers in India and they may not be forced into suicide.

The UN General Assembly adopted the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ on 10 December 1948, in which we see that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (Art 25). Many millions of people in the world today are still far from enjoying these rights in practice. That could be changed, if governments in both rich and poor countries lived up to their commitments. If human rights are respected, more and more people will be happy and the tendency to end their life will be drastically reduced. Some government agencies suggest that the controlled supply of pesticides and alcohol will be a deterrent for committing suicide. I am of the opinion that unless the causes of suicide are treated at a deeper level, the number of suicides will remain the same. Vatican II very clearly states that every life from the moment of conception needs to be protected with great care. “God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to humans the noble mission of safeguarding life, and humans must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception.” (GS 51) This clearly shows that human beings have no right to take anyone’s life including their own.

The Right to Life

Life is a gift from God and out of His love He has created the whole universe. God is a lover of life whose imperishable spirit is in all (Wis 11:26). He takes care of everything and promotes life in all living creatures. God is the source of life (Ps 36:9) and he protects it and does not want anyone to destroy it. Everyone has the right to life in its totality and no one is allowed to take his/her life or the life of someone else. In the Old Testament human life is of great importance. In order to preserve one’s life, everyone has a right to get the basic necessities of life. . The laws in the Torah are particularly designed to protect the widow, the orphan and the poor who are held especially dear to Yahweh. “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner,

giving him food and clothing” (Deut 10:17-19). The *Torah* insists that the Hebrews pay special attention to widows and orphans. It forbids affliction of widows and orphans. God is compassionate and he will hear the cry of widow and orphan and will take action on the oppressors. “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless” (Ex 22:22-24). Though society considers them insignificant, God cares for them and defends their cause. “For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight” (Ps 72:12-14).

The destitutes have a right to a share in the harvest: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border; neither shall you gather the gleanings after the harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner; I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:9-10). In the Old Testament we find specific laws which are meant to look after the interests of the poor and the weak. It is very much concerned about the protection of the poor and the weak. Exodus 23:10-11 prescribes the practice of a Sabbatical year of leaving the land fallow, so that it would be at the disposal of the poor. In sabbatical year debts were to be remitted. “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord’s release has been proclaimed” (Deut 15:1-2). One is not to hesitate to lend to a poor person because the sabbatical year is approaching (vv. 7-11). If the government, banks and moneylenders were to practise the custom of writing off the debts, many lives of farmers could have been saved. They find no way out of their debts and are forced to end their life.

In the Old Testament human dignity is considered the basis of human rights. According to the Jewish understanding, human rights come from the absolute worth of human life. This was in contrast to the Babylonian, Assyrian or Hittite law, which

evaluated human life in economic terms. The prophets look at the world from a divine point of view. Their main task is to bring the world into divine focus. Hence, they do not judge the people with worldly standards, but with the divine norm. Their mission is to invite the people to perceive reality from the divine point of view and to help them to act justly and righteously. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The prophets were very much concerned about the injustices that were prevalent in society. We may look at injustices as typical ingredients of social dynamics, but the prophets considered them great disasters. We are faced with acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, and misery in our day-to-day lives and have become insensitive to them. So we fail to understand the prophets' extreme impatience with injustice. Jews failed to understand why the glorious city of Jerusalem had to be destroyed because of the injustices and oppression committed by some (Micah 3:9-12).

The things that horrified the prophets are now daily occurrences all over the world. Amos condemns the rich for trampling upon the needy, oppressing and cheating the helpless poor, and buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:4-6). Slaves and property meant wealth at the time of the prophet. The properties of the poor were taken away by the rich when they could not pay their debts. Amos condemns such cruel practices. He says that the land shall tremble on this account (8:8). This could mean a prediction of an earthquake which brings grief and misery upon all the inhabitants, especially the rich, and is considered an expression of Yahweh's wrath since the people are totally helpless when faced with an earthquake.²¹ The words of Amos would apply to many modern societies. The prophets were sensitive to the cries of the poor and the needy.

We cannot please God without fulfilling the demands of justice. In Micah 6:6-8, the prophet discusses the nature of worship. He says that God cannot be pleased with 'burnt offerings of calves and rams' or with 'ten thousands of rivers of oil'. Even if a man 'offers his first-born to the Lord for his transgression', it is not enough. What God requires is 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God'. The prophet is convinced that one can

establish right relationship with God only when one establishes right relationship with one's neighbours. The vertical and the horizontal relationships are complementary to each other. The prophets insist on the interiorisation of the law which will sustain and promote life.

In Sirach 34:21-27 we notice that the sacrifice of an unjust person will not be acceptable to God. A poor person survives with what he gets as his/her daily wage. When the employers do not pay just wages, they are like murderers. "To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood" (34:22). Food is the most basic of all needs. Every labourer has the right to satisfy his/her hunger. If anyone deprives the labourer of the means of his/her daily bread that rightfully belongs to him, he is a thief. He is committing a sin against the commandment of God, "You shall not steal." In this case, paying an inadequate wage to a labourer is equivalent to killing him because he has no other means of livelihood. So it is a sin also against the commandment of God, "You shall not kill." Therefore, when an employer does not pay his/her workers a living wage, s/he commits crimes of stealing and killing. James also criticizes very strongly those who do not pay their workers properly and adequately. "Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (Jam 5:4).

Totality of life was the clear-cut criterion of the prophets' words and course of action. They visualized a harmonious and peaceful world. Life, in all its fullness, including its materiality, is the primary concern of all prophets. The bread of life and the earthly bread are not opposed to each other. Denying bread to the needy is one of the greatest crimes.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is seen intervening in history to end slavery, and set the oppressed free. God takes an active role in the liberation of his people. Liberation is a power struggle not only between humans and their oppressors, but also between God and the powers opposed to God. The call of Moses and his mission to liberate the Israelites from Egypt comes from God (Ex 3: 2-12). Hence, liberation is fundamentally an act of God.

Jesus: The Promoter of Life

The teaching of Jesus on Sabbath is that it is created for the sake of rest (Dt 5:14) in order to sustain life. "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. The Sabbath was created so that they may get at least one day of rest after six days of hard labour. "Sabbath is the analogue to God's resting after the process of creation. It is a recurring day in a seven-day week, in which there is an opportunity to stand back, reflect, and achieve a taste of the messianic fulfilment at the end of time, to catch a glimpse of a world at peace."¹ In today's fast-moving world, people have no time to relax, reflect or take rest. This in turn leads to lots of disturbance, tension, unhappiness and restlessness. All these are causes leading to many suicides in India.

Jesus came to give life in its fullness. Hence, bearing witness to Jesus means to bear witness to life. Witness on behalf of life should be the primary concern of the Church today. We see that life is being systematically threatened and annihilated by structural injustice and institutional violence. It would be illusory, useless and blasphemous to claim to bear witness to Jesus without engaging in a continual fight against structural injustice and institutional violence. In Lk 4:18-19, the mission of Jesus seems to be rather earthly and materialistic. Proclaiming release to the captives, giving sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, etc. do not seem to have much spiritual connotation. Through this seemingly materialistic mission of Jesus, he is proclaiming that any genuine help given to our brothers and sisters is at once spiritual because loving and promoting life are spiritual activities (Mt 25: 31-46).

Conclusion

Suicide is often seen as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Every problem is temporary. Every valley has its low point. After reaching it there is only one way to go from that point, and that is upward. The sunrise always overtakes the night. Every problem can be perceived as either solvable, manageable or exploitable. If we can't solve it, at least we can manage it by controlling its negative impact on us. Any captain can be successful on smooth seas. If a captain can control his ship in a rough sea, then his abilities are tested. I can allow the problem to

manage me or I can try to manage the problem. So long as I choose not to surrender to discouragement, depression and despair, I will have proven myself to be bigger than my problem.

In fact there are no problems outside of us. The way we look at the problem is the problem. Debt due to crop failure may appear to be an unsolvable problem for someone and he may want to solve the problem by suicide. But to another it may be an opportunity to seek help from NGOs or friends and find an amicable solution. So it is not the problem but the way we handle the problem is what really matters. We cannot change some situations. But we can change our attitude towards them which will keep us calm, hopeful and cheerful. Problems are often chosen by us. If we are farmers we will have problems connected with farming, weather, loans, etc. If we are doing business, we will meet with problems connected with business. There is no one who doesn't have any problem at all. Therefore, it is natural to have problems in life. So suicide should not be considered a permanent solution to the daily problems of life.

Being a minority group, the Church in India is often busy securing its own rights, and the rights of the oppressed and poor in general are often neglected in the process. This is all the more true after the BJP government has come to power at the centre. There is an increasing number of attacks on Church personnel and institutions. The Church is afraid whether it would be able to survive at all in India, if it takes up social justice issues at the national level. Should the Church in India organize its activities in such a way that it can continue to survive or should its mission be prophetic even if it means persecution and ultimate extinction in India? This is a very difficult situation. On the one hand, unless the Church exists, it cannot do any good work, but on the other hand simply to exist without fulfilling its mission of serving the poor and the oppressed does not make any sense for its existence. The Church needs to find a proper balance between the two.

At present the Church is very cautious and prudent in criticizing human rights violations as she fears her total extinction from India. The function of the Church is to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

A candle is lit in order to give light to those who are around it and not to set fire to everything that is nearby. In the same way, salt is used in order to make the food tasty and not to make the whole food taste like salt. . We can compare the function of the leaven and the salt with the ecclesial community. In one parable Jesus explains how the kingdom is like a small bit of leaven buried in the dough. It produces a change, turning the whole mixture into something else; not into leaven, but into a loaf of bread. The seasoning work of salt is the same. The flavour of a pinch of salt permeates the whole dish of food, not turning it into salt but making it tasty. Thus the primary function of the ecclesial community is not to bring more people into this community but to improve the quality of their lives. Thus the main purpose of evangelization is to improve the quality of life in the world at large rather than to enlarge the number of Christians.

The right to life is not something that is freely given but is procured and sustained through a continuous struggle. Many have suffered and have even sacrificed their lives for the sake of acquiring legitimate rights for themselves and for others. We, the followers of Christ, are called to follow the same path and help those who are depressed and hopeless to look at the positive side of life and make sense out of their life rather than give it up.

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