

The Urban History of Darjeeling Municipality: Then and Now

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Abstract

Darjeeling Municipality is the local governing body responsible for the civic administration of the town of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. It was established in 1850, making it one of the oldest municipalities in West Bengal and one of the oldest city administrative bodies in India. It was initially governed by nominated Commissioners until 1916, then elected until 1932, a nominated again until 1947. After India's independence, the Commissioners continued to be appointed until 1964, when the first election was held. The present paper make a study in historicizing the urbanization process of Darjeeling Municipality. Analysing the impact of urbanization on society and identifying the constraints of economic development due to urbanization.

Key words: Darjeeling Municipality, Administration, Urbanization, Economic Development.

Introduction:

Since nearly all of the Darjeeling Municipality's documents were burned in the fire that destroyed its office on November 20, 1996, it is impossible to piece together the municipality's past. With the aid of a few reference books, historical municipal records, and the recollections of long-gone citizens, we were able to peek into its past, nevertheless.

Nepal, by a treaty signed at Sugauly on 1816 ceded 4000 Sq. miles of its territory to British India which in turn made it over to the Rajah of Sikkim by a treaty signed at Titlya on 10th February 1817. Captain Lloyd and Mr. Grant were fascinated by the location and weather of Darjeeling while they visited Darjeeling in February, 1829 and found this place suitable for sanatorium and cantonments. Lloyd as directed, negotiated with the Rajah of Sikkim for transfer of Darjeeling which was successfully accomplished on 1st February, 1835. In 1839, Dr. Campbell the British Resident in Nepal was transferred to Darjeeling as Superintendent who made Darjeeling an excellent sanatorium. Around 1849 many European houses were built in and around Darjeeling.

Darjeeling Municipality was established on 1st July, 1850. Popular participation in civic administration was actually started in the year 1847. Till 1994 the Municipalities in the State were governed by the Bengal Municipal Act 1932. After the 74th Amendment of the Constitution, which made mandatory to every state to have Municipal authority and hence accordingly West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993 came into force with effect from July, 1994.

Location: Darjeeling Municipal Town is located between 26'31" and 27' 13" of Northern latitude and between 87' 50" and 88' 53" of East longitude and elevation varying from 1981. 20 meters to 2286 meters above sea level. It is a ridge shaped like English letter 'Y' the base resting at

Katapahar and Jalapahar while two arms diverge from the Mall, one dipping suddenly to the North East and ending in the Lebong spur, the other arm running North West passes through the St. Joseph's College and finally ends in the valley near Tukver Tea Estate. In the beginning Darjeeling Municipality was to cover the entire area that was ceded by Rajah of Sikkim for sanatorium. Now it covers an area of 10. 60 Sq. Kilometres.

Municipal Office:

The Municipal office was initially situated in the 2nd floor of Bengal Secretariat Building (presently known as Employment Exchange Building). It was thereafter shifted another office at Cart Road (presently Food and Supply Office) which was later on transferred to C & W. D. Department at a price of Rs. 9,000/- only.

The foundation stone of the present building situated at 1, Laden La Road, was laid by His Excellency The Right Hon'ble Lawrence John Lumpy Dundas, Earl of Ronaldshay, GCIE, Governor of the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal on 27th October, 1917 and also formally opened the building on 27th May, 1921. The Gothic structure was designed by Mr. Cecil. H. Morgan, LRDA the then Municipal Engineer, and construction works were done by Sri Kharga Bahadur. The Englishman on its issue of 30th May 19 21 reports that, "*on the occasion his Excellency said there is little for me to add what Mr Goody has said beyond my congratulations to the people of Darzling upon the completion of the building the foundation stone of which I had laid some three years ago... I think this building might possibly be put in the not very far distance future. It is as its name implies the centre municipal self-government*"... Lord Ranaldshay, then with a silver mounted Khukuri presented to him for the purpose cut the cord which released the main dose of the building. As ill luck would have it the building was gotted by in the night of 20th November 1996. However Darjeeling Municipality in order to provide basic services to the people it functioned from municipal boys' high school and thereafter, from its Sagar Matha Guest House for which had to close down its guest house temporarily.

The reconstruction of the office building was made possible only due to untiring effort of Shri D.K. Pradhan the chairman the counsellors offices and staff of Darjeeling municipality. Keeping the segment of the people in view and to restore the old heritage building and British architectural antiquity the fades with certain modification to adjust the present needs were constructed. The foundation is stone of the building was laid by Shri KC Lama the then vice chairman Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council on 24th April 1997 the construction was entrusted to Mrs Himandri constructions Darjeeling who handed over the premises in March 1999 the office building was formally opened by Shri Subhash Ghising the honourable Chairman and chief executive counsellor Darjeeling Gorka Hill Council on 10th July 1999 and the ceremonial function was presided over by Sri Ashok Bhattacharya the honourable minister for municipal affairs department government of West Bengal.

Population:

The census taken in 1869 from the inhabitants within the limit of Darjeeling Municipality Area corresponding to the track originally ceded by the Raja of Sikkim in 1835, Recorded a total population of 22607 persons. In 1901 Census recorded a population of 16924 and the population

as per 1991 sensors is 71470. The decided Population since 1901 Showed a steady growth swinging between 16 to 19% till 1991 Darjeeling municipality through its development department conducted an unofficial enumeration during the month of March 2000 and recorded its population as 104000. Darjeeling municipality has a floating population of tourists and visitors varying from 25000 to 30000 daily during the tourist seasons. Besides these municipality has to cater its service to another 20,000 comprising of a student officegoers and other workers who reside throughout the year.

Constitution and Election:

Darjeeling Municipality in the inception was placed in the 1st Schedule along with Khulna, Hazaribagh, Muzzaferpur, Darbhanga, Bhagalpur in which the Commissioners were appointed by the local government and also placed in the 2nd Schedule along with Burdwan, Hooghly, Nadia, Hazaribagh etc. in which the Chairman was to be appointed by local government. It was only in 1916 a nomination cum election of the Commissioners was held on a trial basis.

The first General election of Commissioners of Darjeeling Municipality as provided u/s 24 of Bengal Municipal Act 1932, was held on 4th October 1937, and after that formed the board with Mr. A.S. Larkin, ICS as Chairman and Mr. Khan Bahadur D.e. Avari as Vice-Chairman respectively. The first general election based on adult franchise, as notified vid G.O. No. 4120/ME-13/52 dated 27.07.1963 was held on 23rd March 1964. But the newly elected Interim order of injunction till disposal of Civil Rule No. 430(W) of 1964 dated 16.04.1964. Hence, the old Board with Sri A.C. Chatterjee, Advocate as Chairman, and Sri J.B. Thapa as the Vice-Chairman of Darjeeling Municipality continued till the next election. The Municipal Board formed after the election held on 1st May 1966 was superseded in September 1970 and kept in supersession till 14th July 1984. The Municipal Board constituted in 1984 was again superseded on 3rd August 1989 and remained in supersession till May 1994.

The General Election of Councillors of Darjeeling Municipality was held in May 1994 and the election was the first time contested on a party basis the GNLF party formed the board with an overwhelming majority with Sri D.K. Pardhan and Sri S.L. Pardhan as Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively. The last general election of Municipal Councillors, in accordance with the West Bengal Municipal Election (Reservation of seats) Rules 1994, was held in June 1999 and the Board was formed by the GNLF party with a thumping majority with Sri D.K. Pardhan as Chairman and Smt. Manikala Lama as Vice Chairperson. Here we may mention that Sir D.K. Pardhan is the only Chairman who was elected as Chairman for the 2nd term in Darjeeling Municipality.

Till 28th August 1998, Darjeeling Municipality was placed in the 'D' category of the State Municipality. With the representation No. 91/Acs dated 08.06.1998 and No. 96/GD dated 09.06.1998 from the Chairman, Darjeeling Municipality, Government, vide Department Order No. 494/C-4/MM-9/94 Pt I dated 26.08.1998, upgraded the Darjeeling Municipality from 'D' to 'A' category. As some of the wards are very big in area and it is difficult for a single ward councillor to properly look after his/her ward, Municipality vide its letter No. 47/GD dated 25th April 1998 requested the Government for bifurcation of wards which was duly approved by the

Government and in terms of Section 8 of the West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993 increased of the number of wards from 26 to 32 wards vide G.O. No. 495/C-4/MIM-9/94Pt. dated 26th August 1998.

Darjeeling Municipality in its letter No 555/GD dated; 15th January 2000 claimed, “*Darjeeling Municipality is one of the oldest Municipalities established in the year 1850 and has probably attained its maturity for up gradation to the status of corporation on completion of 150 years of its establishment. However, in the overall interest, the Municipality could not be developed as it is left in the same status even after the completion of 150 years. So, for better management of the town and civic amenities, the up gradation of the Municipality to the status of corporation is felt to be very essential.*”

That Darjeeling Municipality besides its being the District and Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) headquarters is the summer residence of the Governors and the dignitaries and thus has occupied a prominent position and recognition since the British Rule.

Darjeeling Town being a historical tourist centre occupies a unique position among the tourist centres of the world and lakhs of domestic and foreign tourists visit this ‘*Queen of Hills*’ every year. Darjeeling Municipality being a hill station deserves some relaxations regarding the criteria required for being a corporation like population etc., and as such be treated as a special case by waiving the population criteria.

Government vide its Memo No. 87/MA/OC-4/1A-1/2000 dated 29th February 2000 agreed to upgrade Darjeeling Municipality to Municipal Corporation.

Functions:

Although in the beginning, Darjeeling Municipality had to provide funds for the maintenance of the Conservancy and Police, its responsibility to provide basic civic services to the people grew to a large extent in the later years.

Electricity:

In a meeting of Commissioners held on 11th February 1886 which was presided over by Mr. R.T. Greer, ICS the then Deputy Commissioner and the Chairman, of Darjeeling Municipality, decided to install a Hydro Electric Power Station at Sidrapong, an orchard farm of Maharaja of Burdwan Sir Bejoy Chandra Mehatab, with an expected loan of Rupees 100000/- from the Government. Maharaja of Burdwan, considering the importance of the scheme was pleased to make over the land to the Municipality at a very nominal price. The first plant with 265 KW Crompton-Brunton single phase with Grunther Turbine was erected by M/s J.W. Mears, CIE, and M/s Kilburn & Co. The total cost of 16 candle power carbon street lamps around the Mall including infrastructure cost a sum of Rs. 120000/- to Darjeeling Municipality. The first house lighted was the Shruberry, the old Raj Bhawan, and the plant was opened by Hon’ble Mr. C.C. Stevens, the then-acting Governor of Bengal on 10th November 1897. Considering the demand the Board of Commissioners added 135 KW was added. The annual income from the electricity then was around Rs. 1 Lakh. Municipality, considering the growing demand, at its meeting held on 9th June 1931 decided to replace the single-phase with the three-phase unit and thus the revenue from electricity increased to nearly Rs. 2 lakhs per year. To avoid keeping consumers

waiting for a long time. The Board of Commissioners in the year 1938 installed 200 KW Diesel Engine Station at Leborg for Rs. 150000/-. The machines were supplied by M/s Belliss & Morcom, England and M/s A Reyrolle & Co. England while all construction works were done by Sri Harkalall Brahmin, Sri Nar Bahadur Chettri, and M/s S.K. Chakravorty.

The Board of Commissioners was proud of the efficient management of the electric supply and records that they restored the supply of electricity within 24 hours even during the dreadful earthquake of January 1934. The management of electricity was taken over by the West Bengal State Electricity Board on 30th January 1978.

Fire Brigade:

The Fire Brigade was one of the important components of the Municipality in the past. At a meeting held on 20th March 1906, the Municipal Commissioners discussed the proposal of Mr. W.H. Edwards regarding the opening of a Fire Brigade unit for Darjeeling Town. He has submitted an estimate of rupees 1500/- only for the supply of uniforms and kits to the brigade personnel. Mr. Edward was so keen to have a full-fledged fire brigade for Darjeeling town and in his letter he mentioned, *'Should there be any difficulty in obtaining this further allotment from Government, I am prepared to start a subscription, which, I believe, there would be a little difficulty in doing, as many natives in the bazaar are quite uninsured, the Cooch Behar Estate is its insurer and the Banks cannot insure their securities; these are the sources from which money should at once be obtainable'*. The Board of Municipal Commissioner approved the proposal.

The brigade was placed under the control of the then Deputy Commissioner and Chairman of Darjeeling Municipality as an ex-officio Superintendent-in-Chief. For the efficient functioning of the fire brigade, there was a Captain appointed from amongst the Commissioners by the Chairman. The last Captain was Sri Chandra Kant Ghising. The fire brigade was composed of 5 sections:

1. Firemen
2. Engineer
3. Salvage Corps
4. Conservancy natives and
5. Police

The people of Darjeeling still talk about the monthly exercises performed by the fire brigade personnel for their fantastic agility and superb attire. Darjeeling Fire Brigade was handed over to the West Bengal Fire Services on 20th October 1967.

Conservancy:

The European portion of the town was chiefly located on the ridge and slopes above the bazaar extending from North to South while the native portion including the bazaar was situated below the West. Street sweeping and garbage etc. were collected on circular bottomless iron dust bins and collected by carts drawn by mules and ponies in the early morning and removed to Batasia by train. Night soil from public and private latrines were collected at night in an iron drum fitted with closed lid and removed to Municipal siding at early morning and buried there. Municipality, for carrying of night soil had brought natives from Alwar where they were accustomed to

extreme cold during the cold weather months. The municipality at a Special Sanitation and Conservancy Committee Meeting held on 10.04.1906 under the Charimanship of Mr. L.S.S. O'Malley, ICS, discussed the Government letter bearing No. 143M dated 26.01.1906 and endorsed by letter No. 3412, dated 26.01.1906 of the then Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling, complaining about offensive smell that spread over the town and imperfect working of conservancy department. Municipality decided to seek the help of Dr. G.J. Fowler, the septic tank expert for sewage and septic tank scheme of Darjeeling Municipality. Dr. Fowler visited many sites and went into details of the scheme and made valuable suggestions. After consulting and seeing the working of sewage and septic tank scheme of the other hill stations such as Simla, Nainital, Dalhousie Municipal Engineer drew up a scheme and thus 1) Bazaar Septic Tank, 2) Wilson Septic Tank, 3) Kakjhora Septic Tank, 4) Bhutia Busty Septic Tank and 5) Tukver Septic Tank were constructed.

Municipality Commissioners were deeply concerned over the report published in The Statesman dated 07.09.1960 regarding deteriorating civic amenities in which the then Health Officer reported thus, *"first of all I must say and it is an undenying fact that the people have no civic sense at all. They indulge in causing nuisance all the twenty-four hours. Swept streets are in no time littered with the refuse, even drains are not spared and are dumped with heavy matters."* Municipal Commissioners at its meeting held on 14.12.1960 discussed the above report of the Health Officer and recommended that the strength of sweepers be gradually increased to 6 sweepers for every thousand population as against the existing strength of 3.8 sweepers for every 1000 population. The present staffing pattern is 1 sweeper for every 1000 populations.

Finding existing septic tanks inadequate the Government in the Department of Hill Affairs, in the year 1985, and on the request of Darjeeling Municipality engaged Consulting Engineering Services (India) Pvt. Ltd. to draw up schemes to revamp old septic tanks and cover uncovered areas of the town. Sri B.K. Parchan, the then Chairman vide his letter No. 201/ME dated 01.09.1987 commented on the report of the consultant and requested the Government for early execution of the work. But it is still to be materialized. Darjeeling Municipality on its own also prepared exclusive and comprehensive plans for the disposal of solid and liquid waste of the town which was estimated to cost around Rs. 20 crores and sought the assistance of the World Bank through State Government. Darjeeling Municipality for quick disposal of liquid waste recently introduced a Cess Pool as a temporary measure.

Hospitals:

Municipality, till the provincial station and taken over by the Government, managed and maintained Victoria Hospital (Eden Hospital) and there was a standing committee of Commissioners to look after the working of the Hospital. It also maintained and managed Infectious Disease Hospital, Maternity Homes, and dispensaries. All these dispensaries are now being managed under different schemes by Darjeeling Municipality.

Schools:

Darjeeling Municipality has two High Schools for boys and girls respectively. Boys' school was established in the year 1922 and the girls' school in the year 1935. In 1938 Darjeeling

Municipality established an Industrial School but had to close down for want of students. Besides these, Municipality managed 50 primary schools within the town and two schools at Sidrapong and Singtom for the children of the staff of the Electricity Department. On 17th May 1952, His Excellency the then Governor of West Bengal Mr. H.C. Mukherjee visited the Municipal Boys' School and made the following remarks, *"Mrs. Mukherjee and I were delighted to pay a visit to the Municipal Free Boys' School which has struck as one of the brightest of its kind that we have ever seen elsewhere. The school is located in a fine building and the accommodation is ample, except that required for a couple of extended classes. There is a commodious place, open on all sides, on the ground floor to serve as a gymnasium, and adjoining thereto is a playground- a small one, of course, as judged by the standards obtained in the plain but not insignificant according to conditions prevailing in the hills- where a fine display of mass drill was arranged for us by the boys on the occasion of our visit. The boys have a band of their own which played some rather pleasing Nepali tunes for our entertainment. The boys in this school not only receive free tuition but are supplied with books, exercise books, and other writing materials free of cost. The school is doing fine work in the matter of education broad-based, a vital need for our newly founded democratic Republic, and I congratulate the Darjeeling Municipality, which is responsible for its maintenance, on the noble example it has set before other local bodies of the same kind in this direction"*.

With its 52 primary schools Darjeeling Municipality, as provided under the West Bengal Urban Primary Education Act 1963, came under the Free and Compulsory Primary Education Scheme with effect from 1st April 1968. In April 1997 in terms of Memo No. 629-SE(P)/10M-8/95 dated 29.01.1996 handed over 50 Primary Schools to Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council for management and maintenance. Till today Darjeeling Municipality is managing the two high schools out of its resources.

Zamindari:

The Government of India vide its order No. 5015 dated 10th October 1863 granted Darjeeling Municipality 44 acres of land comprising Central Bazaar and native town (i.e. bazaar, Lower Breechwood, Chandmari, and Butcher Busty) for its expansion and developmental purposes. The full proprietary right was accorded vid letter No. 2289 dated 14.08.1880 from the Assistant Secretary to the Government of India on condition that the Municipality be authorized to lease out the land at such rates and terms as assessed and approved by the Government. Lord H. Ullick, the then Commissioners of the Rajsahi and Cooch Behar Division in his letter No. 241 MCL dated 02.09.1880 conveyed through the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling, the decision of the Government to accord necessary permission to Municipality to grant lease and fix its rate of rents for land within Darjeeling Municipality area.

Darjeeling Municipality has around 80 buildings, one covered vegetable and meat market, and 2 supermarkets. Most of the buildings are in a prime location of the town. Since these buildings were constructed during the British regime and most of the buildings have surpassed their life, Darjeeling Municipality to solve the housing problem of the town and to enhance its revenue

drew up various housing schemes amounting to Rs. 7.50 crores and sought assistance from World Bank through State Government.

Water Supply:

One of the most important and unique functions of the Darjeeling Municipality is the supply of drinking water to its people. The Municipal Commissioner at a meeting held on 13th May 1878 discussed the Scheme of water supply drawn by Mr. Tyndell, Executive Engineer, Darjeeling, and resolved to move the government for a loan of rupees one lakh for implementation of the scheme. The then Lieutenant Governor offered a donation of Rupees 32000/- and the Government of Bengal, vide its order No. 2095 dated 25th May sanctioned a loan of Rupees 50000/- from Cooch Behar Estate. To lay the pipelines Darjeeling Municipality at its meeting held on 29th April 1881 decided to acquire land of width varying from 10' to 15' aggregating a total area of 4 acres, 1 rood, and 16 poles.

Darjeeling Municipality in terms of Government Circular No. 49M dated 24th December 1903 reported the water supply system thus; *"the water supply of the town is chiefly obtained from the springs in the Senchel Hills and is delivered through 4" and 6" pipes into three settling tanks. The water from these tanks is conveyed by a 9" pipe as far as Joregunghow and thence by two lines of 6" pipes to a point below Jalapahar: one is then reduced to 4" down to the reservoir at Rockville and another continues to the new reservoir constructed at St. Paul's School. The water is distributed from the reservoirs to town through one 6" and two 4" pipes and then smaller pipes of different sizes. Almost the whole of the Municipal area is supplied with spring water delivered through pipes."*

The present water supply of Darjeeling town depends on the annual rainfall at protected area of forest known as catchment area. Water is collected from 25 natural springs of the Senchel range which are arrested and carried down to two lakes by covered stone drains known as conduit lines. The North Lake which was constructed in 1910 has a capacity of 20million gallons and the South Lake was built in 1932 with a capacity of 12.5 million gallons. The water is then carried to different reservoirs of tanks after passing through different treatment plants. The incoming quantity of water is measured by a recorder which keeps a record in a graph automatically and out outgoing quality of water is also measured with the help of a ventury meter which keeps the record in a graph (again) automatically. Water is then mixed up with Alum before entering the filtration plant situated at Jorebunglow and filtration is done with the help of 4 pressure filters. After filtration, the water is chlorinated with liquid chlorine and transported to different reservoirs for distribution. During a lean season when the yield of spring is not sufficient, the water is pumped into the conduit from the Khong Khola. Besides, there is Sindhap Lake, or 3rd lake constructed by the PHE, Department in 1984 with a capacity of 15 million gallons but it had some defect and failed to supply and store the estimated quantity of water. The municipality drew up various schemes to augment the sources of water of which the Rambhi project, which was formally inaugurated by the Chief Minister, is still incomplete. Recently Darjeeling Municipality for a permanent solution to the problem has prepared a scheme to pump water from the Balasun river with an estimated cost of around Rs. 55 crores and has sought the help of World Bank

through State Government Professor K.B. Sahay rightly remarked in his article 'Water Crisis' published in The Statesman dated 1st August 2000 that, "if petrol and diesel can be reached from one corner of the country to the other, there is no reason why there should be scarcity of water for domestic needs anywhere in the country at any time. Surely governments have failed in their duty to ensure regular supply of potable water for all despite all the promises of political parties".

The municipality considers the revamping of the distribution system and augmentation of sources as are dire necessity and a full-fledged and comprehensive scheme is very essential to cope with the present and future demand.

Finance:

The income of Darjeeling Municipality comes mainly from rates and taxes based on the rental valuation of the property and holdings in the town. The municipality also collects rents from tenants of the Municipality building and markets. The present financial position of the municipality is not very sound. The Commissioners at its meeting held on 23rd October 1952 discussed the deteriorating financial position of the Municipality and made the following observations: "While Darjeeling Municipality was fairly affluent circumstances before the war, its financial position has greatly deteriorated during and after the war. Every cost including the cost of establishment, maintenance, capital works, and repair has gone up by several hundred percent with very little increase in Municipal income. To give only one and two examples of establishment charges, before the war total emoluments of a Municipal sweeper was Rs. 15/- per month. Now the total emoluments is Rs. 46/- per month of which the Government contributes Rs. 8/- per month. The Municipal expenditure has, therefore, gone up by more than 150% The cost of materials needed for Municipal works has gone up by 300% to 400% so as the wages of labour. So far as the house property is concerned, while the rate of rent in the town has increased manifold, the Municipality has to observe the conditions of the Rent Control Act, and has not, therefore, been able to increase its rent beyond 10% over the pre-war rates".

Such is the situation of the Municipality at present, the Municipality revised the Pay and Allowances of its staff by merging pre-1961 D.A. with effect from 01.04.1969 and the Administrator in agreement with the Municipal Karmachari Union also revised the scale of pay by merging D.A. as stood in 01.01.1973 with effect from 01.01.1973. Municipality in terms of Government Order No. 15/C-9/MIM-3/81 dated Calcutta, the 20th April 1982 revised the scale of pay of its employees with effect from 1st April 1981 wherein Municipality had to mobilise its resources to meet the additional expenditures. Government, vide Order No. 93/MA/O/C-5/S/1R-1/98 dated 17th February 1999 revised the scale of pay of Municipal Employees with effect from 1st January 1996. Hence, there is a huge increase in establishment costs. Despite its stringent financial position Municipality never failed to provide its services to the people. M/s Kirloskar Consultants Limited, Chennai was duly assigned by the World Bank to study the functioning of Darjeeling Municipality reported in its Rapid Assessment Study and commended as 'Poor Finances & Good Services'.

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