

Purse-seiners, trawlers, and the epic fight over fishing in Tamil Nadu

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A ban on purse-seine fishing in Tamil Nadu has threatened thousands of fishers' livelihoods - and they are refusing to give up without a fight

"There were young people with degrees taking to purse seines because of the pay," Karthi P said. "It was easy work."

He was one of those. Having completed a diploma in mechanical engineering, Karthi, now 28 years old, got involved in purse-seine fishing in Nagapattinam, a seaside town on the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu. Eventually, he also became a partner in *Aayiram Kaliyamman* - a purse-seine fleet named after a local deity. But that was all before 2020, when purse-seine fishing was banned in the southern Indian state, leaving Karthi and many others like him fighting for their livelihoods.

Purse-seine nets - which can run one or two kilometres long and hang a few hundred metres deep underwater, with floats at the top and weights attached to the bottom - are used in the open ocean to catch schooling fish such as sardines and mackerel. Fish shoals are encircled with the net, like a curtain, before the bottom of it is quickly pulled together, creating a "purse" that prevents the fish from escaping. The method often sees several vessels working together - a typical fleet consists of a mechanised "queen" boat, sometimes equipped with nets of varying mesh sizes, and six to ten non-mechanised boats that help lay the net, herd and encircle shoals, and bring in the netted catch.

Nagapattinam district - situated at the northern end of the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka, and looking out on the Bay of Bengal to the east - is the epicentre of the battle over purse-seine fishing in Tamil Nadu. Less than a few kilometres apart in Nagapattinam town lie the hamlets of Nambiyar Nagar and Akkaraipettai. It was a tussle between them that led to the current ban.

Karthi belongs to Nambiyar Nagar, which once had ten purse-seine fleets. Akkaraipettai, just to the south, had none. But Akkaraipettai is home to more than two hundred trawlers - mechanised boats that catch fish by dragging a submerged net through deep water, or even along the seabed. And Akkaraipettai controls the Nagapattinam harbour, where the district's fish trade is concentrated.

Trawl-boat catches are typically not as fresh as those from purse-seiners. Trawlers tend to spend days or weeks out at sea, accumulating and storing their catch before heading back to shore. Purse-seiners, with their massive nets, take in big catches at a go and quickly bring them ashore to auction centres. Trawl-boat owners complain that traders stop bidding for trawler catches whenever purse-seiners enter the harbour. With lots of fresh fish suddenly on offer, purse-seiners sell their catch off competitively, sometimes at reduced prices. In corralling single-species shoals, they also bring in less bycatch - non-target marine life caught unintentionally - leaving no need for significant sorting or cleaning of the catch before sale. Trawl boats, struggling for buyers, are often forced to sell cheap, or sometimes even dispose of their catches for almost nothing by giving them up to make fish oil, chicken feed or fertiliser inputs.

It is not just trawlers that suffer. Traditional fishers, using small non-mechanised boats and simpler nets, also struggle to compete. Their small catches, of comparatively inferior quality and with less shelf life because of damage to entangled fish, simply do not compare. And purse-seiners exploit the same inshore fishing grounds and target the same schooling fish species as traditional fishers.

Fishers in Tamil Nadu started to adopt purse-seine fishing after the mid 2000s. The state government had already banned purse-seine fishing within its territorial waters in 2000, but the ban was not implemented – officials at the state fisheries department said they had no means to do so at the time. Informal agreements and arrangements on the ground allowed purse-seiners to operate smoothly, and so more and more people sank money into purse-seining over the years, which is why the implementation of the ban in 2020 hit so many so hard.

When the ban came, there were estimated to be more than 200 mechanised purse-seine boats in Nagapattinam district alone, worth hundreds of crores of rupees. The ban affected an estimated 1.5 million fishers across nine of the fourteen coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, as well as the town of Karaikal in the neighbouring union territory of Puducherry.

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But trawlers and traditional fishers have always far outnumbered purse-seiners in Tamil Nadu’s coastal villages, and they made their numbers count. Feeling that their livelihoods were threatened by purse seines, they put pressure on Tamil Nadu’s government and political parties to act. With the enforcement of the ban in 2020, they got what they demanded.

But Tamil Nadu’s battle over purse-seine fishing is not done yet. Purse-seiners have gone to court to challenge the state government’s ban and the matter is still sub judice. With the start of a new fishing season this June, and armed with an interim order from the Supreme Court of India granting them relief, purse-seiners in Tamil Nadu tried to start fishing again. Boats were painted afresh, nets cleaned and mended, and purse-seine fleets assembled at Poompuhar, some 50 kilometres north of Nagapattinam. But the government was unmoved. Police took control of the Poompuhar fishing harbour and stopped the purse seiners from going to sea.

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Fisheries officials, afraid of unrest across the region if the purse-seiners were allowed to restart operations, negotiated with them to stand down. Angry purse-seiners shouted and pleaded that they were neck-deep in debt and were on their deathbeds. Still, officials refused them permission. In private, officials admitted sympathy but said they were helpless in the face of a lack of political will.

The officials asked for 48 hours to sort things out and promised to implement the court orders to allow purse-seiners to work. Young purse-seiners warned that the coast would be set afire within hours if they decided to take matters into their own hands. The older lot, in their wisdom, huddled together and decided not to push any further. Collectively, they declared that they would wait 48 hours for the promised official actions – but no more.

Purse-seine fishing first evolved in the Atlantic in the late 19th century. In India, with encouragement from scientists and some local adaptations, it took off on the country’s western coast in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before finally finding its way to Tamil Nadu.

Purse seines are attractive because of the massive catches they bring in at a go, ranging anywhere

between 1 to 5 tonnes of fish. “On good days, the catch could be worth fifteen or twenty lakhs,” Karthi said – a sum somewhere between USD 18,000 and USD 24,000. With fuel expenses of INR 25,000 to 50,000 a day, the returns were high. With trawl boats, a three-hour trawl might bring in fish worth INR 30,000 to 50,000, fishers said, but even modest purse-seine catches from a single netting can be worth several lakhs. Purse-seiners’ occasional large hauls are more than enough to make up for lean days when they do not find large shoals, which is an inherent feature of the fishing method.

According to purse-seiners, a purse-seine net costs roughly half a crore Indian rupees – around USD 60,000 today. An entire fleet needs around one and a half crore rupees to put together. But the typical way of funding a fleet in Tamil Nadu meant the capital outlay per head here was reasonably small.

Karthi’s fleet, *Aayiram Kaliyamman*, had 60 partners. “An individual’s share was just one and a half to two lakh rupees,” he said. The money could be arranged by pawning jewellery or by borrowing. Most of the fleet’s co-owners, like Karthi, were not wealthy businessmen, and otherwise worked within the fishing industry. The labour required in purse-seine fishing also motivated these big-group partnerships – operating a full fleet requires lots of hands, and co-owners tended to also work as labourers on their own fleets. A few months of purse-seine fishing every year was a desirable, lucrative proposition for them.

“Some days, I would earn as much as 40,000 rupees,” Karthi recalled. The bumper days were restricted to a few times during the roughly four-month period each year when purse-seiners could operate profitably, when sea conditions were right and large shoals were in the vicinity. But the returns were still phenomenally high compared to other employment options – working in trawlers or traditional boats, or migrating abroad. Migration to Singapore, Malaysia or other Southeast Asian countries with an established Tamil diaspora requires many lakhs of rupees just to set off, and the debts typically incurred to do so take a long time to pay off even when things go well. Traditional fishing often pays less than INR 1000 a day, and working on trawlers is even less remunerative.

“Trawl boats require us to stay longer at sea but would earn us just 10,000 or 15,000 rupees for the trouble of working two to four weeks,” 25-year-old Venkitesh A, also of Nambiyar Nagar, said. An eight-standard dropout who earlier worked on trawlers, Venkitesh, like Karthi, had become a partner in a purse-seine fleet before the ban.

Purse-seine fishing requires highly skilled fishers who can spot shoals from kilometres away, and there is always a risk of going to sea but returning empty-handed. In the neighbouring state of Kerala, where a modified form of purse-seine fishing is in operation, I went out with a fleet a few times without luck, setting off before dawn each time and coming back to shore at sunset.

Trawling gives more assured returns per trip, even if there is less chance of a bumper catch. But for workers on the boats, the takings are always small. Trawlers, unlike purse-seines, are typically owned by individual businessmen – sometimes two or three as partners – with well-to-do owners having multiple boats each. This ownership structure means the owners always stand to make more – for each trip out, fishers said, a trawl boat’s owner or owners take around 60 percent of the earnings after recovering expenses. The captain takes around 10 percent and the eight to ten workers onboard have to be content with sharing the rest. Trawl-boat owners in Nagapattinam said that a trip extending a week or more brings in a catch worth INR 5 to 8 lakh on average.

For fishers, trawling has other downsides as well. Trawl boats from Nagapattinam, and elsewhere around the Palk Strait, often “drift” into Sri Lankan waters. They are drawn there by fertile, undepleted fishing grounds – the result of Sri Lanka’s underdeveloped fishing industry and ban on

trawling in its waters. But, once there, Indian fishers risk being fired upon or arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy, as happens with some frequency. With purse-seine fishing, fishers know they can return home every night.

But, of course, not everyone was happy with the rise of purse-seine fleets. “With purse seines, the 50-odd people involved get money, others suffer,” Selva Kumar, a former trawl-boat owner, said. Kumar hails from Keechankuppam, which lies sandwiched between Nambiyar Nagar and Akkaraipettai. Purse-seiners did not just drive prices down and leave trawlers and traditional fishers without buyers. “When purse-seine boats were operating, it was impossible to find labour,” Kumar said. Knowing they had little to gain from work on trawl boats, enterprising fishers instead preferred to join and work in purse-seine partnerships whenever possible.

Kumar ran a business selling engine oil to boats before he bought into trawl fishing. Unable to keep up with losses, Kumar sold his trawl-net fishing venture five years ago. Now 41 years old, he was in the process of migrating to New Zealand as a low-skilled worker.

Purse seines have historically been an emotive point for traditional fishers too, and not just in Tamil Nadu. In the 1980s, when purse-seiners first began widespread operations in the state of Kerala, it caused competition and conflict on land and sea, both over fishing grounds and over sale prices. This led the Kerala government to pass a ban on purse-seine fishing in 1984. The ban became operational in 1993, when the Supreme Court of India upheld the ban within Kerala’s territorial waters. But, since then, traditional fishers in Kerala have themselves taken to ring-seine fishing, a form of purse seine-net fishing that circumvents the ban by using smaller, leaner, cabin-less boats and a different method of net operation.

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Across India, the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Karnataka and West Bengal have not imposed any restrictions on purse seines. But Odisha, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, have all banned purse-seine fishing in their territorial waters, just like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry (although in Puducherry, the ban is not implemented on the ground). In Maharashtra, purse-seines are regulated even if not banned.

“Even to arrange a simple meeting, we have to approach these *mukyastharugal*,” a senior official of the fisheries department overseeing neighbouring Mayiladuthurai district said. Mukyastharugal are leaders of traditional *panchayats* – not to be confused with India’s official local-governance bodies under the Panchayati Raj Institutions. These extra-legal panchayats, centred around places of worship and organised around communities’ common professions, enjoy great authority and autonomy in the fishing villages of coastal Tamil Nadu. Each village selects some 10 to 30 panchayat members, and responsibilities mostly rotate between influential families. Local power structures, such as harbour-management committees, are controlled by them. Some officials conceded that the ban on purse seines would have been impossible to implement without the demand for it coming from these panchayats.

“It was after the tsunami that we started to understand their system,” a senior police officer in Mayiladuthurai said, asking to remain unnamed. Mayiladuthurai district, which includes Poompuhar, was created in 2020, after the purse-seine ban, and was earlier part of Nagapattinam district. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami hit Nagapattinam’s coastline hard – over 6000 people were killed and many thousands more were displaced. The disaster also caused a churn in local power equations.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, Akkaraipettai saw its population grow, with many tsunami-displaced fishing families coming to settle there. Nambiyar Nagar, by contrast, saw people moving out. Until then, fishers in Nagapattinam said, the two hamlets were of similar fishing strength.

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In 2015, the Nagapattinam fishing harbour, now under the control of the Akkaraipettai panchayat, was upgraded under a World Bank-funded rehabilitation package. In early September 2017, shortly after its inauguration, clashes broke out between fishers from Nambiyar Nagar and Akkaraipettai over rights to the harbour’s use. Fishing nets were set on fire, more than fifty two-wheelers were thrown into the sea, two motorcycles were torched and 35 people were injured.

After the clashes, through a resolution of the local panchayats, Akkaraipettai was declared the *thalamai gramam* for the region of Nagapattinam, Karaikal and Mayiladuthurai, covering a 200-kilometre stretch of coastline. A *thalamai giramam* – best translated as head village – is vested with leadership of all traditional panchayats in an area. Earlier, Nambiyar Nagar was widely accepted as the *thalamai giramam* here.

Purse seines had frequently been a point of contention between different panchayats, and they had already held discussions on the issue earlier. Unsettled differences led to a petition being filed in the Madras High Court in September 2018, asking for action against those using purse-seine nets.

Not all panchayats had purse-seiners, and even in the ones that did they did not always have overwhelming support. Purse-seiner villages like Nambiyar Nagar were in the minority. In the newly formed Mayiladuthurai district, which has some of the strongest support for purse seines in the state, only eight of the 28 fishing villages support purse seines, as per fisheries department figures. Purse seiners themselves claim that the number is 14 of 28.

In February 2020, rising tensions saw the state government reiterate its two-decade-old ban on purse seines. With the ban still unimplemented, the issue reached the *thalamai giramam* in Akkaraipettai for a final decision. That August, through its resolution, the region’s traditional panchayats banned purse seines.

“All the 66 panchayats collectively made the decision,” 47-year-old Kalaimani M, a member of the Akkaraipettai panchayat at the time and responsible for overseeing the issue of purse seines, claimed. Kalaimani is presently a member of the Harbour Working Committee at Nagapattinam – a post he was selected for by the Akkaraipettai panchayat.

“The entire tussle was caused by sardines,” Arivarasan S, a trading agent and distributor in Nagapattinam, said. Sardines, otherwise inexpensive, became dear in Kerala, the country’s top fish-consuming state, after they disappeared from its waters. The spurt of demand for sardines in Kerala helped purse-seiners in Tamil Nadu make quick money – and from the point of view of trawl-boat and traditional fishing-boat owners, this came at their expense.

“It was pure jealousy,” Karthi said of the motivations underlying the ban. Before the ban, things were looking good for Nambiyar Nagar. “Our village was coming up. Houses were being built and renovated. Seeing our progress, they were sulking.” Even as Akkaraipettai had the fishing harbour under its control, it was widely accepted that purse-seiners were hurting its fishers. And there was ever more interest and investment in purse-seiners, as evident from the bigger, longer purse-seine boats that were being floated just before the ban.

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smoothly, which is why the implementation of the ban in 2020 hit so many so hard.”

“They did it solely for vote-bank politics,” Senthil Kumar Jambulingam, a purse-seine fisher from Poompuhar, said. Jambulingam has been fighting to restore purse-seiners’ fishing rights ever since the ban. He accused the state government of the time, led by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), of siding with the trawlers. Tamil Nadu’s fishing communities have traditionally supported the AIADMK, and the Akkaraipettai panchayat, with many influential trawler-owning businessmen and local politicians, leveraged its influence to the trawlers’ gain, Jambulingam explained. Tamil Nadu had an election coming up in 2021, and after the ban many purse-seine villages boycotted the vote. The AIADMK lost the election to the rival Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) – in some places, purse-seiners claimed credit for the reversal – but the new government has continued with the ban. Back in 2000, it was a DMK government that brought in the original prohibition.

The Tamil Nadu government justified the 2020 ban as a means to preserve marine resources. But Naveen Bangera, the vice-president of the Karnataka Purse-Seine Fishermen’s Association, had a different view. “The ban on purse seines is driven by emotive and political pressures rather than scientific reasoning,” Bangera said. Purse-seine fishing, he claimed, is among the most efficient fishing methods. Its bycatch amounts to around 10 percent of the whole catch, he said, whereas trawl boats bring in as much as 70 percent bycatch.

Purse-seiners spot and identify shoals of specific fish species before setting their nets. Such targeting reduces the chances of bringing in non-target marine life. They also tend to use nets of different mesh sizes for each target species, allowing juvenile specimens and smaller non-target species to escape. This further reduces the bycatch as well as the need for later sorting. But on occasions when a catch brings in more fish than a boat has room to carry to shore, purse seiners tend to discard the excess fish mid-sea, which feeds into accusations of them being wasteful.

Trawlers, on the other hand, are mostly shooting blind: they lower their nets and drag them through the water for a few hours hoping to catch target species, and discover what they have caught once their nets are hauled back up.

“If sustainability was a factor, trawl boats should have been under the scanner first,” Nithin Kumar, the owner of seven trawl boats in Mangaluru, on the Karnataka coast, confessed. Kumar said trawlers’ bycatch, including juvenile specimens that are illegal to fish, is very high. This was something even trawl-boat owners in Nagapattinam admitted in private.

Research supports a ban on trawling as an effective measure for biodiversity conservation, and many places have taken this step. In 2011, Hong Kong banned trawl-fishing in its waters. Brazil, China, Australia, Malaysia and dozens of other countries have prohibited trawling in particular areas. In 2017, Sri Lanka banned bottom-trawling – which uses weighted nets dragged along the seafloor to target groundfish and crabs, devastating vital breeding grounds and seabed ecosystems. While India has bans on mechanised fishing boats during breeding seasons, the country has no outright bans on trawling.

“Comparatively speaking, one can say trawl boats threaten marine resources more – all fishing methods do so in some form,” Ashalatha, a principal scientist at the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology in Kochi, who works closely with fishing communities, said. “But purse seines see larger resistance as they pose a direct threat to other sectors of fishers.” At the same time, she added, no government can ban trawl-boats due to their large contribution to fisheries exports.

“It is not about the conservation of fisheries,” Nivedha M Murugan, a DMK leader now representing Poompuhar in Tamil Nadu’s legislative assembly, said. The AIADMK government in power in 2020 “just reacted to the tensions and conveniently sided with the majority view” – that is, with trawl-boat and traditional fishing-boat owners. Murugan asked why officials have not shown similar gusto in holding trawl boats to a ban on multi-day fishing – by law, trawlers are also required to return to shore each day. But trawl boats typically leave for sea with weeks’ worth of supplies, and often end up impounded in Sri Lankan waters with no questions asked on the Tamil Nadu side. And even Murugan’s own party continues to allow this practice now that it is in charge of Tamil Nadu.

“It has become a social issue now,” S Velvizhi, a marine biologist, said. Velvizhi is the director of the Fish For All Research and Training Centre at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation in Poompuhar. Tamil Nadu has close to six hundred fishing villages, and each has picked sides. Nambiyar Nagar, which refused to accept the Akkaraipettai panchayat’s decision to ban purse seines, was put under social boycott. Others who sided with purse-seiners were also boycotted. Their boats were denied anchor and their fish were not allowed to be sold in the local harbours. Even villages sharing familial relations shunned each other.

“Purse-seine fishing brings in much less bycatch than trawling, but the Tamil Nadu government has suggested otherwise in its justification for banning purse seines in its territorial waters.”

Some purse-seine villages like Nambiyar Nagar have now built their own fishing harbours. This is testimony to the efficacy and hold of traditional panchayats as well. Nambiyar Nagar’s small harbour was built under a public-private partnership between the state government and the village’s traditional panchayat. The fisheries department’s estimated budget for the proposed harbour was some INR 34 crore – more than USD 4 million. Nambiyar Nagar’s roughly 4000-strong fisher community pooled roughly INR 11.5 crore to unlock a grant to cover the remainder. But with purse seines out of operation, the rebel harbour still awaits action.

Velvizhi blamed departmental inaction for the mess. Officials’ failure to enforce the original ban in 2000 saw fishers invest huge amounts of money in purse seiners over the years, and the waste could have been avoided had they upheld the law.

“Because of the ban, the village’s economy crashed,” Karthi said. Nambiyar Nagar had just two trawl boats in 2020, so there was nowhere else for its fishers to find work. Those who could muster enough resources, like him, bought motorised fibre boats, costing anywhere between INR 5 and 10 lakh each, and turned to small-scale fishing instead.

Venkitesh found work on Karthi’s boat. He, Karthi and three others fishing together earned anywhere between INR 200 and 500 a day, they said – though some days they earned nothing at all.

“The catch is too low to even survive on,” Karthi said about fibre-boat fishing in October last year. Within weeks of this conversation, he moved to Kochi, in Kerala, to work on boats there as a labourer. In some purse-seine villages, almost all the menfolk took a similar route.

“All the fish are here now,” Karthi said over the phone from Kochi. Ending their unexplained hiatus, sardines had reappeared on Kerala’s coast. Off the shores of Nagapattinam, meanwhile, they had vanished.

When purse-seiners’ appeal against the ban came up before the Supreme Court in February 2022,

the Tamil Nadu government argued that purse-seine fishing was a “pernicious”, non-selective fishing technology used by affluent fishers and beyond the reach of ordinary fishers. But a report by a Supreme Court-appointed expert committee stated that purse-seine fishing per se has not resulted in any serious resource depletion, and therefore suggested that a ban on it was not justified. The committee asked for purse-seine fishing to be allowed, subject to certain conditions, in India’s territorial waters and exclusive economic zone – the defined area of the sea where each coastal country has exclusive rights over marine resources.

“The Supreme Court of India has granted interim relief to fishers affected by Tamil Nadu’s ban on purse-seine fishing, but the state government delayed letting purse-seiners return to work.”

In its order granting interim relief to purse-seiners, issued this January, the court allowed partial operation: purse-seiners were to venture out only twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, between 8 am and 6 pm. But the Tamil Nadu government declared itself incapable of managing purse-seine operations, and stuck to a ban on purse seines within the area under its control – the state’s territorial waters, stretching up to 12 nautical miles from its shores.

“The order is as good as useless,” Karthi said in June from Nambiyar Nagar. He had returned home because of a seasonal fishing ban in Kerala coinciding with the onset of the southwest monsoon. Even if purse-seiners were allowed to work, the court’s conditions do not afford them enough time to operate profitably, he explained. Out of the 10 hours of operation permitted on each day, many would be spent travelling to good fishing grounds, and even then some fish are prone to surface around sunrise and sunset, when purse-seiners are expected to be in harbour under the order.

It was fitting that Poompuhar led the way in trying to go back to work in light of the court order – just as it had in taking the Tamil Nadu government to court over the ban in the first place. The idea was that Poompuhar would show the way, and other purse-seine villages could then follow suit. But after the stymied attempt to put a purse-seine flotilla to sea from Poompuhar in June, the 48-hour window officials asked for to resolve the situation stretched out into a week, then two, then three. Meanwhile, the waiting purse-seiners watched the fishing season pass them by. Finally, in early August, the fisheries department gave three purse-seine boats from Pazhayar, near Poompuhar, permission to operate on the days and in the hours allowed by the court order. All the other boats were left hanging as before.

Purse-seiners have now resolved to file a contempt-of-court petition in the Supreme Court. In Nambiyar Nagar, Karthi did not see much room for optimism. “Earlier, we were anticipating that a court order will solve everything,” he said from the bow of *Aayiram Kaliamman*, his fleet’s queen boat and one of five remaining purse-seine boats in the village. “Now even with the court order, nothing has changed.” The other five of Nambiyar Nagar’s ten original purse-seine boats have either been sold off or converted into trawlers. If things do not change soon, Karthi said, *Aayiram Kaliamman* will also have to be sold, or simply scrapped.

“I have lost hope,” he said as we parted. “Who will buy?”

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