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Citizenship Concerns among the Matua Community in West Bengal: An Analytical Study of the Citizenship Amendment Act

Ramesh Chandra Biswas[1], Dr. Shiv Chandra Jha[2], Dr. Kajal Dey[3]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Geography, Sona Devi University, Ghatsila, Jharkhand
[2]Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Sona Devi University, Ghatsila, Jharkhand
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, S.C.B.C. College, Lalbagh, Murshidabad

Abstract
The issue of citizenship within the Matua community in West Bengal stems from caste-based marginalization, the Partition, displacement, and migration from eastern Bengal. A large number of Matuas, who are mainly part of the Namasudra Scheduled Caste community, moved to India after 1947 and again during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. After having lived in India for many years, some people still face uncertainty about their citizenship because of partial migration and incomplete family records. This paper looks at these concerns in the light of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024, and the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025. By carrying out a qualitative analysis of the legislation, government notifications, academic writings, and certain media reports, the study investigates the connection between citizenship, documentation, and a sense of belonging. It contends that the CAA offers a pathway to citizenship based on eligibility rather than granting citizenship automatically. The paper also shows how political mobilisation contributes to the sense of citizenship insecurity among the Matua community.

Keywords: Matua community; CAA-2019; Partition; documentation; political identity.

1. Introduction

Citizenship is of course a legal relationship between an individual and the state, a relationship which confers rights, protections and political membership. For many of the displaced and marginalised it is also a relationship which is inextricably linked to dignity, to security and to the sense of belonging. The Matua community of West Bengal provides a very useful case in which to examine this. The Matuas are in effect the community of the Namasudras, a historically marginalised caste group who are primarily located in eastern Bengal. Partition in 1947 cut the Bengal of that time in two and so disrupted family, land, livelihood and community networks. There was a continuing flow of migration into West Bengal in the form of the Matuas in the aftermath of partition, as well as in the wake of the communal violence and during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (Chatterji, 2007).

Migration didn't produce the same result for every family. For some families the result was a life established in India over many generations. For others the questions of when they came, their ancestry and the existence of documentary evidence were still very much issues. The various iterations of citizenship law have had a significant effect on how some migrants view their status and their future. The

2024 Rules set out the process for applications under the 2019 amendment, and the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025, provides a separate route of immigration relief for certain categories of migrants.

This paper looks at the citizenship issues of the Matuas in the context of these various legal measures. It looks at the issue of historical dispossession, the documentary requirements, the difference between immigration relief and citizenship and the political significance of the CAA. The main point is that a legal route may well open up an opportunity for those who are eligible, but it will not in itself address the historical and practical problems of lost records, the sheer complexity of the administrative process, the issue of caste marginalisation or the various competing political readings of the CAA.

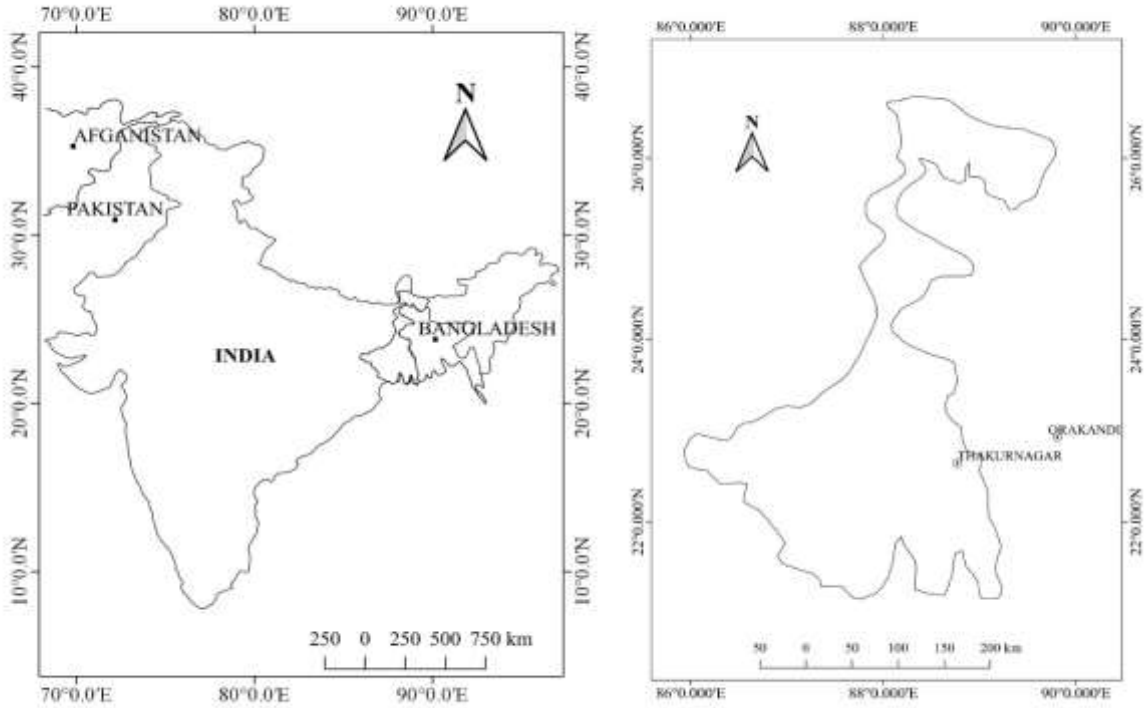
2. Objectives of the Study

The study has five objectives:

1. to outline the historical background of Matua migration and citizenship insecurity;
2. to examine the principal provisions of the CAA, 2019, and the 2024 Rules;
3. to distinguish the CAA's citizenship pathway from the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025;
4. to look at the effect of the Citizenship (Third Amendment) Rules, 2026 on the Matua community's claims to citizenship under section 6B of the Citizenship Act.
5. to look at how documentation, caste identity and political mobilisation affect citizenship concerns.

3. Study Area:

West Bengal with Special Reference to CAA and Migrant People of Matua community.



Map I: Location of West Bengal in India

West Bengal (in east India) shares an international border with Bangladesh and has a long history of cross border migration, particularly in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Liberation of Bangladesh. This has had a profound impact on the state's demographics, settlement patterns, modes of livelihood and the wider socio-political environment. The CAA 2019 is of particular relevance to the state in that it provides a route to Indian citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians who are migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan and who have entered India on or before 31st December 2014, subject to the requisite statutory conditions.

This looks at migration patterns, the experience of settlement, concerns around citizenship and the socio-economic impact of the CAA with a particular focus on the border districts of Murshidabad, Nadia and North 24 Parganas.

4. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative, descriptive and analytical study based on secondary sources. The primary sources are the Citizenship Act, 1955; the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019; the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024; and the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025. It also makes use of a range of academic literature on Partition, caste, the displacement of refugees and Dalit migrant politics as well as a number of selected media reports on the CAA application process.

Document analysis is used to establish the eligibility rules, the documentary requirements and the stated scope of the relevant legal measures. The sources are grouped thematically around migration, citizenship, documentation, political identity and social inclusion. This is a desk study (it does not claim to be based on any interviews or a full field survey). Media reports are used as accounts of reported experience rather than as a substitute for representative evidence. The study therefore provides a qualitative interpretation of the issue rather than a quantification of the number of Matua people who are eligible, who have applied and who are undocumented.

4.1 Supplementary Contextual Observations

Beyond the published sources, the study is also informed by the researcher's own experiences of helping people complete their CAA application forms and from direct observation at the verification centres. The experiences and observations have given a real sense of the practical difficulties applicants face, the sorts of concerns they have about the documentation and the process of applying for and going through the verification process. They are used purely to provide context to the analysis of the published sources and do not in any way represent the experience of the wider Matua community.

5. Literature Review

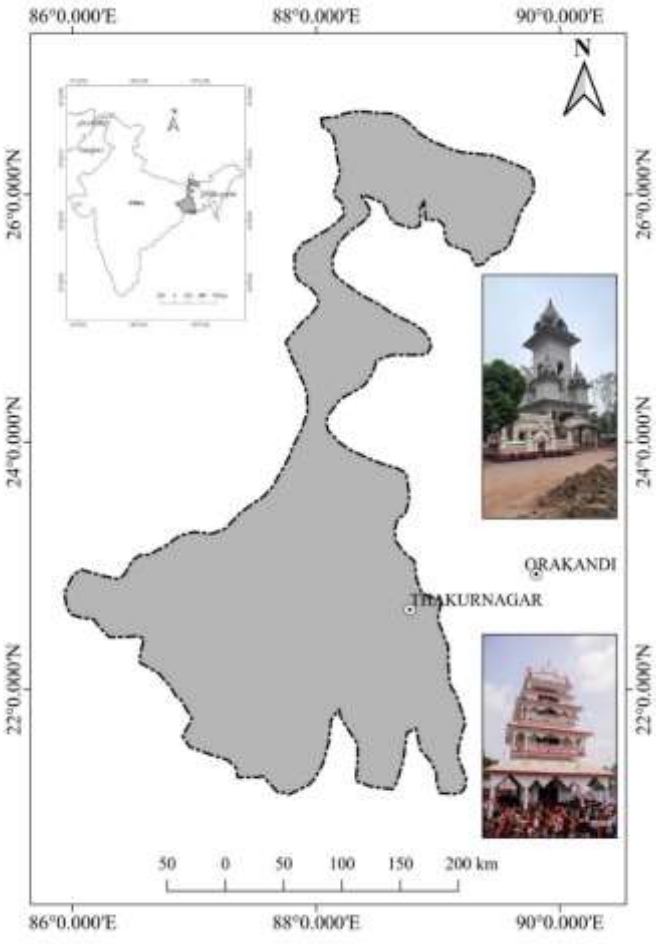
The relevant literature on Matua citizenship can be divided into three broad categories: caste and social assertion, Partition and the issue of displacement of refugees and the resulting sense of belonging, and the politics of citizenship. Bandyopadhyay (2004) offers an excellent analysis of caste, culture and social subordination in colonial Bengal which provides a useful framework for understanding the historical marginalisation of lower castes and their subsequent assertion of identity. Chatterji (2007) shows that the Partition of Bengal was in fact a long drawn out process of social and political change rather than a single event with a consequent impact on migration, rehabilitation and the sense of belonging. These works provide a useful context for understanding the Namasudra experience of displacement.

Mukherjee (2020) in her study of a Namasudra refugee camp site in the suburbs of Calcutta makes a very important point about the length of time that displacement can take. It's not always a case of simply moving

from A to B. The process of resettlement, the construction of a social identity and access to resources can all remain in a state of flux for a very long time after you've arrived. Sinharay (2019) looks at the nexus of caste, citizenship and nation through the lens of Dalit migrant politics in West Bengal. He demonstrates that the Namasudra migrants have been subject to a constant process of being asked to prove themselves as citizens of the nation. This is very pertinent to the present study as it links the issue of citizenship documentation directly to caste and political identity.

Recent reporting on the implementation of the CAA has also highlighted uncertainty amongst some Matua people as to what documentation is required to establish both country of origin and date of entry (Bhattacharya & Sarkar, 2024). This is useful in terms of identifying the issues that have arisen during implementation, though it does not allow us to determine the extent to which any given experience is shared by the wider community. Collectively the sources point to the need to study citizenship as the product of the interplay of historical displacement, caste, the rules of law and political mobilisation.

The paper in question builds on that literature by looking at the 2024 application rules in conjunction with the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order 2025. Its contribution is a focused comparison of the two and an examination of why legal eligibility, documentary evidence and the sense of belonging in one's own life are not necessarily the same thing



Map 2: Historical origin and migration : Orakandi (Bangladesh) to Thakurnagar (West Bengal India)

6. Historical Background: Caste, Matua Identity, and Migration.

The Matua movement arose among the Namasudras of nineteenth century eastern Bengal. It was associated with Harichand Thakur and subsequently Guruchand Thakur and was a movement which challenged the system of caste hierarchy and untouchability, placing emphasis on dignity, education and collective self-respect. It was therefore not simply a religious movement but also an important expression of lower caste assertion (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

The 1947 partition saw the Namasudra heartland of eastern Bengal go to East Pakistan and many families were thus severed from their land, their relatives and their traditional institutions. Migration to India took place in several waves, driven by communal violence, a sense of insecurity, pressure of livelihood and political change. There was further migration in the early 1950s as a result of the violence and again during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In West Bengal the Matua families settled in various places with the largest concentrations in Nadia and North 24 Parganas. Thakurnagar in particular became a major religious and organisational centre.

The experience of displacement was not the same for all families. The timing of the migration, the level of economic resources available, the conditions of settlement, access to rehabilitation and the extent to which records were retained all varied. The community should not therefore be treated as a monolithic group with a single migration history or a single citizenship status. That said, the history of displacement is very much part of the reason why citizenship and official status continue to be such a significant political and social issue for many Matuas (Chatterji 2007; Mukherjee 2020).

7. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, and the 2024 Rules

The main statutory framework for Indian citizenship is the Citizenship Act, 1955. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 added special provisions for certain persons belonging to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India on or before 31st December 2014 and satisfy the requisite conditions. For the persons covered by the Act the route to citizenship is via registration or naturalisation; it does not in any way automatically confer citizenship on all persons of the named communities. (Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019).

The Citizenship (Amendment) Rules 2024 (notified 11th March 2024) set out the process for the application for citizenship by eligible persons. The Rules set out the forms, the declarations and the documentary evidence (including the documents which are to be used to establish a link to one of the three countries and entry into India by the statutory cut-off date) and the application will be examined in accordance with the prescribed process before a certificate can be issued.

The CAA is of particular relevance to eligible Matua applicants who migrated from Bangladesh on or before 31 December 2014. Community identity in itself is not sufficient to establish eligibility. One must fall within the relevant statutory categories and meet the applicable requirements. The CAA should not be viewed as the sole route to Indian citizenship as the wider Citizenship Act continues to provide other avenues for those who meet their respective criteria. This paper is focused on the CAA as it has become the central issue in the Matua citizenship politics.

8. Documentation and Practical Concerns

A major practical issue is the need to establish eligibility through the prescribed documentary process. Families who moved many years ago (often in conditions of insecurity) may well have no original documentation at all (passports, birth certificates, land records etc) from their country of origin. The names

and dates may not even match up across the various records. The issue is not simply about having an Indian ID document but about being able to provide the kind of evidence that is required for the particular application.

The Indian documents you'd be using on a day to day basis (the voter ID, the Aadhaar card, the ration card etc) may well be the sort of document you'd expect to be used in the course of your life. They shouldn't be assumed to be proof of everything required under the CAA application process. The weight of a document in a legal context will be determined by the rules that apply and the purpose for which it's being put forward. There's been some report from the Matua areas of a degree of anxiety on the part of some applicants as to the need to prove former nationality or former residence and a lack of clarity as to what documents are acceptable (Bhattacharya & Sarkar, 2024). That is a situation which calls for clear public guidance rather than proof that all applicants are in the same position.

Another issue is access to the application process. For people with low digital literacy, those who don't have access to any support and/or who are just not entirely clear on the official instructions, the online forms, the affidavits, the document scanning and the verification can be a significant barrier. You can end up with incomplete applications or people just walking away. Accessible help centres, checklists in local languages that are easy to understand and very clear guidance as to the legal effect of applying could make a huge difference in reducing confusion which is entirely avoidable.

It's equally important to distinguish between anxiety and a certain legal outcome. Concerns about your existing rights, the impact of a CAA application on those rights and the impact of an application being refused or still pending should be dealt with in terms of the law and the relevant official guidance, not political promises. You should not be in a position to assume that an application under the CAA will necessarily lead to the loss of your existing rights and you should not be in a position to guarantee that every applicant will in fact be granted citizenship. The outcome will be determined by the individual circumstances and the statutory process.

9. The Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025

The Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025 is a separate Order under the immigration framework. It provides for certain exemptions in respect of passport, travel document and visa requirements for members of the designated minority communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who have entered India on or before 31st December 2024 as refugees fleeing religious persecution or fear of religious persecution, as per the terms of the Order (Government of India, 2025b).

The Order is not to be confused with the CAA. The CAA provides a pathway to citizenship for those who meet its conditions (the 31 December 2014 cut-off being one of them). The 2025 Order deals with the immigration document requirements for a category which has a different cut-off date (a later one); it does not in itself confer Indian citizenship. A person falling within the Order would still be required to satisfy the requirements of any other separate process by which citizenship is sought.

For the Matua community this is a significant distinction as families will have come at different times. The CAA may be relevant to those who entered on or before the 2014 cut-off under that scheme, the 2025 Order may be relevant to certain later entrants who meet its criteria. Neither is in any way an automatic right. They are separate schemes with separate purposes, separate eligibility tests and separate procedures. The public need to be clear about that distinction and not to conflate immigration relief with citizenship.

10. Citizenship (Third Amendment) Rules, 2026 and Its Implications for the Matua Community in West Bengal

The Citizenship (Third Amendment) Rules, 2026 (notified by the Ministry of Home Affairs on 19th August 2026) contain a very significant procedural change in respect of the implementation of Section 6B of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026) as it applies to the grant of citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. The Rules permit the District Collector/District Magistrate in West Bengal to receive, scrutinise and dispose of applications for registration or naturalisation electronically thereby eliminating the need for the previous multi-stage process which had required the District Level Committees and the Empowered Committees (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026).

For the Matua community (who are mainly in Nadia, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas) this is of significant analytical value as it could result in a reduction of procedural delays and bring the citizenship decision much closer to the district of residence of the applicant (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026). The relevant MHA order has directed that all pending Section 6B applications in West Bengal be transferred from the Empowered Committee and the District Level Committee to the concerned Collector. This is clearly an effort to speed up the processing of the huge number of CAA applications which have been sitting around for years (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026).

From the Matua community's point of view it's all about administrative devolution and simplifying the process. It makes absolutely no difference to the underlying issues of documentary proof, eligibility, cut-off dates or the general angst about verification of citizenship (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026). The 2026 Rules may go some way to making it easier for the eligible Matua applicants to go through the process but the fundamental issues of the community regarding legal certainty, documentation and the long term security of their citizenship are still at the heart of the analysis of the CAA in West Bengal (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026).

11. Caste, Political Identity, and Citizenship

The Matua citizenship question is also a question of identity politics. In the past the Matua movement has been a force asserting dignity and challenging the politics of caste exclusion. In current political discourse the Matua are frequently treated as Hindu refugees or as a constituency. Sinharay (2019) makes the point that this way of framing the issue needs to be interrogated as citizenship, caste and national belonging are all interlinked and Dalit migrants are frequently asked to prove their status as citizens of the nation.

The language of religious identity can quite easily make the CAA look like it's fulfilling a long standing demand from the eligible Hindu migrants from Bangladesh. It can also serve to obscure the history of Namasudra caste oppression and the community's own specific claims to social equality. The identities are not mutually exclusive and individual Matua families will have different understandings of their interests. Some will be more focused on citizenship, some on welfare and local development and others on caste dignity and the life of the religious community.

The community should not be viewed as a monolithic "vote bank". Preferences will vary from one locality to another depending on the local leadership, family experience, access to welfare and views on the CAA. Parties may make citizenship a central promise but the actual process is one of law and documentary verification. There is thus a gap between the political promise and the individual outcome. The mere existence of a political promise will not in any way establish that a person is eligible, has applied or will in fact be granted citizenship.

For a lot of people citizenship also has a symbolic dimension in that it's a recognition of them as a full member of the country, it's a form of security against being marginalised or excluded and it's a source of confidence in the status of the next generation. That said the symbolic meaning of citizenship must be separated out from the actual legal entitlements. The right to vote, eligibility for welfare, the ability to obtain identity documents and citizenship itself are all related but distinct categories. It's vital to get these distinctions right if we are to properly understand the community's concerns without either over-reaching or under-representing them.

12. Discussion and Findings

The analysis yields four key observations. First, the issue of Matua citizenship has its origins in the Partition, the subsequent waves of migration and the history of caste marginalisation. It is not simply a matter of a recent political controversy. Second, the CAA provides a route to citizenship for those who meet its criteria, though it is by no means a route that is automatically open to all. Third, the documentary requirements can be a real problem for some people, particularly those who migrated many years ago or whose records are not complete. The extent of this problem is of course not something that can be established from the secondary sources we have drawn upon. Fourth, the 2025 Exemption Order is different from the CAA in that it deals with specific immigration document requirements rather than with the granting of citizenship.

These observations point to a tension between the legal categories and the actual lived histories of people. Someone may have lived in India for many years and be very much an Indian in terms of their identity and experience, yet the application process may require proof of origin and date of entry. Historical displacement can make it very difficult to provide that evidence. The outcome can be a situation of uncertainty even where a route is in fact available. It's not that documentary verification is in any way illegitimate, it's simply that we need to have transparent processes which take account of the circumstances in which records may have been lost or may have never been issued at all.

The evidence also points to citizenship debates having the power to reconfigure political identity. The Matua community's history of caste and its identity as a community of the displaced can be reworked through the lens of religious and electoral politics. These narratives can bring citizenship claims to the fore but may at the same time mask the diversity of opinion within the community and other claims for social justice. As this study is based entirely on documentary and secondary sources it does not purport to establish the views of all Matua families or indeed the proportion of them who are eligible, who have applied and who have in fact received citizenship.

13. Recommendations

Firstly, the official information on the CAA application process should be made available in plain Bengali and in other languages that are spoken in the area, with actual examples of the types of documents that would be acceptable as per the Rules. Secondly, there should be accessible assistance centres where people can go to get help with the forms, affidavits and the documentation required, without any promise of a particular result. Thirdly, the authorities should make it clear what the legal distinction is between CAA citizenship and the immigration exemptions under the 2025 Order. Fourthly, the application process itself should be transparent with regard to verification, the status of applications and what the options are if an application is incomplete or is refused. Fifthly, any discussion of policy should take account of the historical impact of Partition and of caste marginalisation, without making the assumption that all Matua

families have the same migration history or the same political leaning. Finally, further field work in the Matua areas should be carried out to record the applicants' experiences, the types of records that are available to them, their level of awareness of the law and the practical problems they report. The field work should be properly designed with a clearly articulated sampling method and should not be used to make claims that go beyond the evidence.

14. Conclusion

The citizenship issue for the Matua community of West Bengal is one of the most complex in the region and stems from the combined history of caste, Partition, displacement and political identity. The CAA 2019 and the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules 2024 do provide a route for those who are eligible under the rules, but that doesn't mean that all Matua people will automatically be citizens. The application process requires that you establish your eligibility through the prescribed process and for some families that will be a very difficult thing to do given that their migration was many years ago and their records are not complete.

The Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order 2025 is of relevance to a very different class of migrant as it's an order dealing with exemptions from certain immigration document requirements. It is not a measure which confers citizenship. It is absolutely vital that these different instruments are kept distinct in the public eye.

Ultimately the Matua case demonstrates that citizenship is both a legal status and a question of belonging. A sensible policy response will require accurate information, accessible procedures, transparent decision making and an appreciation of the history of displacement and of caste exclusion. The legal regime creates opportunities for the eligible, but whether those opportunities are in fact realised in practice will depend on the implementation and on the ability of the applicants to get through the process. More field work is required to understand how these processes are experienced across the community.

15. Acknowledgement:

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