

9 **Bollywood Tourism among the Hindustanis in the Netherlands**

A Transnational Perspective¹

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Introduction

The Dutch Hindustani community is a prominent group in the Netherlands that has its roots in various parts of North India. It is a community belonging to the Indian diaspora that is generationally away from India given its colonial history of indentured labor migration from British India to the Dutch colony of Suriname in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Consequently, after Suriname gained independence in 1975, there was a wave of migration of this community to Holland. This pattern of double migration led them to be connoted as the ‘twice-migrants’ (Verstappen & Rutten, 2007). Decades of spatial detachment later, they still actively maintain a keen interest in their distant first homeland India. This connection is reflected in, for example, their voracious consumption of Indian popular culture, practicing Indian performing arts or the manner in which they celebrate Indian religious festivals at home. Today, the Netherlands has the second largest Indian diasporic community in Europe (Longkumer, 2013).

According to Basu (2004), in this global world of movement, the notion of ‘home’ has become a powerful part of the contemporary debate to relocate identity. Many members of the diasporic communities therefore visit their ‘homelands’ to re-root their identities, soothe their nostalgia and find nourishment. This temporary diasporic visitation to homeland is acknowledged in academic circles as ‘diaspora tourism’ or ‘roots tourism’ (Timothy, 1997; Timothy & Teye, 2004). Sara Ahmed’s seminal work discusses the situational feeling of ‘home’ that comes with these transnational journeys. Her work dwells on the possibility of having multiple homes, and an individual’s movement between them, drawing a distinction between a space which almost feels like home but is not (Ahmed, 1999, p. 331). This adds valuable insights to how the Dutch Hindustanis may situationally feel at home in the Netherlands, India, and Suriname at the same time.

This chapter investigates the role and significance of Bollywood cinema for developing feelings of belonging among the Dutch Hindustanis and furthermore seeks to understand the extent to which Bollywood cinema motivates them to physically conduct a touristic visitation to places represented by Bollywood (Bhattacharya, 2018). The research question that guides this chapter is ‘What are

the cinematic imaginations of India developed by the Dutch Hindustanis under the influence of Bollywood cinema, and to what extent do these imaginations influence their travel decisions to India?

With this chapter, I aim to contribute to existing debates within the field of film tourism studies while also diversifying it. Existing research on film tourism has a strong Western focus and is often based on isolated, high-profile examples of box-office hits resulting in tourism. Besides a few studies (see Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2018; Biswas & Croy, 2018; Laing & Frost, 2018), a non-Western film industry like Bollywood or a destination like India is seldom discussed in film tourism research. This is remarkable considering that Indian film industry is one of the largest producers of films annually and caters to one of the largest diasporic audiences globally. Thus, this chapter aims to depart from the monolithic definition of ‘the’ film tourist and signal a departure from the classical *3W*’s tourists – *wealthy, white and western* – by exploring the potential of tourism across various groups by reflecting on a specialized section of film tourists, who are in fact diasporic film audiences.

This chapter utilizes insights from 17 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between June and October 2017, across different cities in the Netherlands. The participants were asked questions about their imagination of India, the role of Bollywood in their lives as well as its impact on their travel decisions to India. The collected data was transcribed verbatim and then subjected to thematic analysis.

The role of cinema in home and belonging

The phenomenon of film tourism is not limited to the actual act of tourism alone but is deeply rooted in the prior processes of consumption of the media narratives, fantasizing about the locations concerned and then ending with a reflection of the finished journey (Larsen & Urry, 2011; Reijnders, 2016). This process of imagination is triggered when confronted with visual or auditory cues. Being a combination of both robust visuals and songs, Bollywood readily tends to fuel the imaginative process. Appadurai’s (1996) concept of *mediascapes* – that is, ‘image-centered, narrative based accounts of strips of reality’ (p. 35) – can be understood as the many media outlets – in this case cinema – that shape the ‘imagined world’ we inhabit, where indeed, narratives and images from the media have become pivotal for how people form an initial image about ‘other’ places and cultures. This is especially true for diasporic communities, like the Dutch Hindustanis, who are generationally away from their homeland and therefore substantially rely on the imaginations of a place as propagated by cinema and other media. As Appadurai (1990) writes, ‘The further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct “imagined worlds”’ (p. 299). For these diasporic communities, popular culture holds significance not only for providing a tourist gaze of foreign countries but also for guiding them construct an image of their own ‘homeland’ and possibly to inspire future travel plans.

The Indian diaspora is one of the biggest around the globe, and many of its members actively seek to maintain and condition their (multicultural) ‘Indianness’,

which has led to the formation of a global Indian diasporic identity. Bollywood films and songs are tremendously popular within these communities (Bal & Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2003). Existing research shows that the cultural (and religious) expressions associated with India grant the Dutch Hindustanis the visibility and distinctiveness among the various communities in the Netherlands, a very multi-cultural country in itself (Bal, 2012). As Gowricharn (2009, 2016) notes, travels to India are popular among the Hindustani community, which are often a combination of pilgrimage, tourism, the quest for tracking their roots, and shopping, while helping them retain their language, fashion, identity, gender patterns and social intercourse (Verstappen & Rutten, 2007).

As vastly researched, Bollywood cinema has gained considerable significance in the domain of cultural studies globally from multiple perspectives. From understanding Bollywood's changing linguistic norms (Ahmad, 2018), to studying the representation of whiteness in films (Acciari, 2017), the scope and study of Bollywood cinema from various socio-cultural angles has been rather robust. In addition, works by Dudrah (2002), Mishra (2002), Punathambekar (2005), Mohammad (2007), Bandyopadhyay (2008), Takhar et al. (2012), Marwah (2017), among others, illustrate an ever-growing presence of the diasporic viewpoints in the studying of popular Hindi cinema. However, what remains predominant in many of these studies is the perspective of the Indian diasporic audiences from the United States. Often there is lower emphasis on Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), that is, people who migrated under varying situations such as post-colonial circumstances, despite their large presence in the global Indian landscape. For example, few studies discuss diasporic groups such as the Indo-Fijians in Australia (e.g., Lal, 1990; Voigt-Graf, 2004), or the East African diaspora in the United Kingdom (Mattausch, 2011).

Several studies have addressed the popularity of Bollywood among Hindustani diasporic communities (Gowricharn, 2009; Gowricharn & Choenni, 2006a; 2006b). Gowricharn (2009), for instance, discusses how Bollywood constitutes a powerful 'source culture' and enhances transnational ties between second-generation Hindustanis and India, supporting the idea that Bollywood is a powerful transnational force which influences cultural bonding among the Hindustani diaspora, its influence on their everyday lives and how they watch more Bollywood movies over Western cinema while living in Europe (Gowricharn, 2009). This insight also provides an important stepping-stone to this chapter as to how the Dutch Hindustani community reconnects with India through cinema, by not only providing entertainment, emotional and cultural anchorage, but also by being a medium that creates both a mental and a real travel route between India and the Netherlands. It therefore becomes important to understand their process of identity construction through cinema, and how these diasporic imaginaries generate film-induced tourism to their ancestral land. There is still a remarkable gap to address this through the lens of diasporic media studies and film tourism studies. This chapter aims to take a first step in bridging this gap by empirically exploring the connections between Bollywood consumption, image-building and the creation of travel itineraries among the Dutch Hindustani community.

Imagining India through Bollywood

Ryan (44) moved to the Netherlands at the age of one. His grandfather was Indian, but he and his parents were born in Suriname. At least two generations have spent their entire life physically detached from the Indian subcontinent. In such a family set-up, the stories of Bollywood cinema have been a big inspiration in the lives of many like Ryan to be mentally connected with India and its popular culture. It is this visuality and robustness of the medium that mirrors the Indian landscape and soothes their curiosity about what India must look like:

Yeah, it (life) is always inspired by the (Bollywood) movies, I think... . The movies are our guide because we are living in Holland and... . through the movies we see India... .

(Ryan, 44, Rotterdam)

While there are many new mediated ways of communication that facilitate the 'connection' with India, it is the 'infotainment' aspect of Bollywood cinema that makes it a desirable medium. For most participants, like Ryan, Bollywood facilitates a connection with India and is likewise used by Hindustani parents as a tool to keep their children in touch with the place they themselves originally came from. Consumption of Bollywood movies not only aids them in learning Hindi but also helps to pick up Indian cultural codes and rituals far away from their current cultural context in the Netherlands which is largely European. For Akash (23), who was born and raised in the Netherlands and has never set foot on Indian soil, Bollywood narratives of India have not only increased his knowledge of the Hindi language but has also shaped his popular imagination of India, adding to it a more positive connotation:

If Bollywood wouldn't have been there, I wouldn't have known a lot of things... . It wouldn't seem so beautiful in my head, because in the news it doesn't seem as beautiful as it seems in the movies.

(Akash, 23, Rotterdam)

This cultural transfiguration returns among most of the participants. Merlin (40), for example, was born and raised in Holland and has never visited India. She has a strong desire to go there, but she also feels scared to actually travel to India due to her unfamiliarity with the country. However, she credits Bollywood cinema for keeping her interested and informed about her roots. She interprets these movies as replacements for actually traveling there. This supports the idea of film spectators as potential film tourists (Corbin, 2014). Bollywood movies tell her about her distant homeland, its practices and places, and in some cases even provides her with the longing to be there herself:

I don't know if I will go, because I find it a bit scary... . But when I see it in movies... . there are places I think 'Oh, those are nice, that looks nice!,' maybe

I can go, and see how it is for myself... [. . .] I have learnt about India that the traditions there are more sacred than they are here in the Netherlands. They are more meaningful over there than they are here.

Having these cinematic imaginations of India without having actually been there reflects the extent of Bollywood's influence in the lives of the Hindustani participants. The Dutch Hindustanis emotionally depend on the imaginaries propagated by Bollywood cinema, which is potentially also an important reason for their affinity with Bollywood cinema. However, many recent movies tend to be shot abroad for the most part, and therefore risk hampering the process of imagining India among the diasporic audiences. In similar light, Jaswina (38) says,

Nowadays movies are less interesting when they are set abroad and a lot of them are set abroad in the West. You know, like, Europe or America. I actually want to see India... I think [. . .] my motivation is to see India. And all those movies from now... they're only showing me (the west). Especially after my time over there, I really feel more connected to India in different ways than before I went to India [. . .] A way to keep the bond with India or to see India, is through the movies.

(Jaswina, 38, The Hague)

In response to these recent production trends, many participants like Jaswina show a renewed interest in the classics from the 1980s and 1990s, when popular Hindi cinema often portrayed India in a relatively social-realist style and was arguably more 'relatable' than the current crop of contemporary movies. As Jaswina puts it, a definite way of keeping the bond with India for the participants is to watch Bollywood movies and this may hold true for Indian diaspora in general. While the shooting of Bollywood films abroad entices the domestic Indian audiences to go explore places abroad (Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022), to some extent it also seems to affect the connection between the diasporic audiences and India.

A particularly interesting fact is that many of the participants consider Bollywood cinema to be the *first* source for fueling their imagination, thereby making cinema akin to guidebooks, educating them about various rituals and festivities of Indian culture. This also imparts a strange sense of familiarity when they finally visit India, with expectations largely guided by the cinema:

I have grown up with movies since I was little... I watched every weekend only Bollywood movies, I went with my dad to the video store and got all the movies that I wanted, 6 or 7 and watched them really the whole weekend... And it appealed to me because it had singing, dancing, laughter... And I could identify myself with those actors, in the sense of 'Oh, I am also a part from India', my great-grandparents are from India, and when I saw the movies I was like 'Oh, there's a part of me!' and the language is also a part of me... And growing up I learnt the language from Bollywood movies as well, not only from my parents but also from the movies...

(Chan, 54, Arnhem)

As these quotes show, Bollywood creates idealized cinematic imaginaries of the Indian 'homeland'. But why does India constitute the 'homeland' for these participants? How does Suriname or the Netherlands fit in this picture? And what is the role of cinema in these different identity processes?

Cinematic identities: Homeland, hostland and the land in-between

Verstappen and Rutten (2007) state that the Dutch Hindustanis identify with India and the Netherlands and consider both countries to be their home. Gowricharn (2009) also indicates the growing absence of Suriname in the self-perception of Hindustanis. Even after so many years and miles of distance from India, the Dutch Hindustanis interviewed for this study still relate themselves first with India and, second, with Holland. The relation to Suriname was rarely acknowledged during the interviews and often this relationship with the 'intermediary country' was dismissed completely. As Gowricharn (2009) points out, there has been a constant process of 'ethnification' of Indian culture among the Suriname Hindustanis, which he defines as 'the modified reproduction of the ethnic community, taking the form of institutionalization and the establishment of cultural identity' (Gowricharn, 2009: 10). This has consequently resulted in an unequal representation of India and the Netherlands in the media consumption of the Hindustanis, with consequences for the underlying identification processes. After moving to the Netherlands at the age of one and living there ever since, Ryan currently feels more 'Indian' than 'European':

I don't balance it (my identity), because I'm feeling more Indian than European. And that's why I always mention it, you know, and I don't act like a European also. I love my roti, you know, and I love my masala... I'm more Indian than European.

(Ryan, 44, Rotterdam)

Similarly, this feeling of situational identities is experienced at all age groups. Asha, who left Suriname at the age of 10, feels similarly:

... When I'm at work... I am Dutch. But when I introduce myself or they ask me where I come from, then I always say, my roots lie in India. I was born in Suriname but my grand ancestors came from India. Uh, but at festivals, I feel Indian. You know, I'm a Hindustani. Not an Indian, but a *Hindustani*.

(Asha, 57, Rotterdam)

According to Bal (2012), the affinity toward Suriname, the intermediary country, is greatly dependent on the generation one belongs to. She notes that many from the first generation of migrants from Suriname in the Netherlands identify as Surinamese, but many from the younger generation of Hindustanis born in the Netherlands do not share the same feelings about Suriname. For example, Chietra

(37) explains that she finds it easier to connect with ‘her Indian self’ over ‘her Surinamese self’:

My first time in India was [...] five years ago. I feel so connected with everyone. I love my Saree, and, and my bangles and ‘payals’. And there it’s so normal... . I feel more connected to India than with Suriname and that’s so strange because my grandparents and my mummy and daddy are all from Suriname.

(Chietra, 37, Almere)

It is duly noted that the connection that many participants felt with India was more of a cultural connection – something they felt proud to associate themselves with. How can this lack of identification with Suriname be explained? It may perhaps be attributed to the mediatized presence of India in global popular culture, making identification with it more relatable for the Hindustanis in the Netherlands. Chiming with the previous interviewee’s thoughts on home and belonging, Lisa (24) points out the strong presence of Indian movies in global popular culture and how this provides her with something of her own in an overly European society in which it is sometimes hard to belong:

You know, Bollywood kind of became my saving, like, this was mine and nobody really knows what’s going on with that [...] I grew up with a lot of people of colour, so there’s always this everything and this was just mine... . And also, to have a language in a Dutch speaking bubble it’s very nice... .

(Lisa, 24, Rotterdam)

This quote from Lisa shows how the clear presence of Bollywood in global popular culture provides diasporic audiences with an important tool for identity work: one can identify as Indian because there are global references to ‘Indianness’.

For people like Lisa and many others, growing up and trying to find one’s own voice in a multicultural, Western world can be quite challenging. Bollywood seems to provide a welcome ‘tool’ in this process. Lisa pointed out how she tried hip-hop multiple times but failed at it, because it wasn’t hers. Her personality and interests always resonated with Bollywood; her cultural identity was Indian. In the process of imagining India through Bollywood, and relating to it and building one’s own identity through it, it becomes the question if these cinematic associations result in concrete travel interests in Indian destinations.

Cinematic itineraries: Traveling in India ‘as-seen-on-screen’

After having seen many Bollywood movies, and identifying with the country and culture as depicted in these storylines, many participants experience a growing desire to actually visit this ‘homeland’. It becomes all the more interesting when diasporic audiences are involved, as a part of their family history is embedded in India. For example, Chan proclaims to be a vivid fan of Bollywood movies and

explains that these cinema-viewing experiences eventually drove him to book his first trip to India at the age of 35:

When I started watching Bollywood movies, I was becoming a part of India... . And I think it was 1999, when I decided, okay let's go, I am so curious about India, and I have seen a lot of movies and places, Juhu beach... . Goa... . So the first step I put in Delhi, I somehow felt emotions in my body and I started crying... . And since then [. . .] I go almost every year to India.

(Chan, 54, Arnhem)

Similar to Chan, Joy (41) was also inspired by cinema to conduct not only his first travels but also the subsequent trips to India:

The movies and the interest in India itself really took me. I went four times to India. Just because of Bollywood. Because otherwise I didn't know about India. I saw India through the movies. And yeah, it took my interest and I thought okay, I need to see this. I need to experience this... .

(Joy, 41, Rijswijk)

However, one must remember that the 'Bollywood lens' provides only a sanitized and idealized version of India that does not necessarily meet the expectations of diasporic tourists who have developed and sustained Bollywood-inspired imaginaries of India. Asha, for example, shares her experience of being in India for the first time:

I was really shocked. Because I saw so much poverty. I was really scared... . because I saw so many people. And many poor people that you didn't see in the movie. But what I saw there was such a big contrast.

(Asha, 57, Rotterdam)

Such experiences are common among the Dutch Hindustanis as their affiliation to India is often limited to the cultural codes transmitted through the Bollywood cinema, while being away from the ground realities of what India has to offer. Seema, who visited India for the first time at a young age of 9, shares:

I already had images that what I saw in the movies, that's India. And I was very excited, like, 'yay! Everything what I see in the movies that will become true. So beautiful, so nice'. So I was really happy. It was just a dream come true for me. And when I came there, I was feeling 'oh gosh. It's so dirty'. And when you're walking, 'oh my god'. I just walk into the *gobar* [cow excreta]. And everywhere you got the cows and everything and it smells dirty.

Going to India due to being inspired by Bollywood cinema is something that happened often, but where exactly do these 'roots travelers' go? Joy explained how

he created a travel itinerary through India based on his knowledge of Bollywood movies, traveling from place to place. More participants used Bollywood associations in a similar direct way to create a travel plan for themselves which they followed through the trip. It not only included film studios or film tours, but also locations that felt familiar through the movies:

. . . There are a lot of movies that have good places to show what India is. And it keeps you like, ‘oh I want to go there’ So, I think a lot of people from the diaspora, who go see India is eighty percent because of the movies. . . . I saw the movies and I took it [straight] with me.

(Chan, 54, Arnhem)

Chietra who agrees to the idea that Bollywood is often instrumental in influencing people’s travel decisions toward India says,

Bollywood movies have an influence. The beautiful places which we can see in the movies and then you can imagine, ‘Hey, when I’m going to travel, I want to see this. I want to see the Taj Mahal. Because you see it on your screen, but then you can see it in real life’.

(Chietra, 37, Almere)

Jaswina also recalled how cinema was a strong factor when planning her recent short trip to Mumbai. Her travel decisions were, to a large extent, driven by her interest in popular Bollywood actors:

Because we are just here for one day (we thought) ‘okay, let’s go to the place where Bollywood actors are living’. Not like, let’s see a fort or something or go to a museum. So the only thing I have seen in Mumbai is Marine drive. And the area where the stars are living.

(Jaswina, 38, The Hague)

These findings are interesting as they seem to point at practices that go beyond the standard itinerary of the film tourist. These participants are not in search of one specific movie or one particular scene, as is commonly the case, but they use a collection of Bollywood movies and celebrity hotspots to develop a multi-sided tour through India, traveling from one movie to another and experiencing India through the lenses of Bollywood as a cohesive whole. I would like to refer to these practices by coining the concept of ‘cinematic itineraries’: travel itineraries that are composed of several sites associated with multiple movies or associated film stars.

What makes these cinematic itineraries through India so exciting for the participants? For some, going to see the spots which mark their fandom for Bollywood often equals a dream-like situation:

. . . I think the one thing that really stood out to me was when we went to Marine Drive and I had just seen *Wake Up Sid*, and I was like ‘Yes!’ you know,

amazing... . That was my fake Bollywood moment, and then also the fact that we went along *Mannat*, you know, and then the guide was just like ‘Yeah, this is *Mannat*, this is where Shahrukh Khan lives’.

(Lisa, 24, Rotterdam)

From the interviews, it became clear how much influence films have on the manner in which the diaspora connects with and discovers locations beyond the usual Indian cities. Rajnie says,

I saw *Lootera* a few months ago, and I think it was shot in Dalhousie, so ever since I saw *Lootera* I wanted to go to Dalhousie... . In Raaz, they went to Shimla, and I still want to go to Shimla... .

(Rajnie, 35, Rotterdam)

Lisa expresses her desire to go back to India, and Mumbai in particular, to re-live her Bollywood moments:

I want to go back to Mumbai again, just to have that quintessential Bollywood experience... . I really want to be like that uber tourist, you know, and (see) everything that you’ve seen in movies so far, I would like to see that for real and have these experiences.

(Lisa, 24, Rotterdam)

Chietra (37) speaks about why she loves Bollywood movies and how they influence her association and experience of India:

...In movies you see a lot of places where I went to. Let’s say Mumbai. Then you see the central station and you see Juhu beach. And in one of my vlogs I said, ‘Look! I am here just as in the Bollywood movies you see the Juhu beach, this is the Juhu beach!’

(Chietra, 37, Almere)

For these participants, going to India rarely meant going in search of their roots or their ancestral home, or finding long lost relatives and friends. The visit to India does elicit a strong emotional response, but the primary motivation has largely been to visit a generic and idealized India as imagined in Bollywood movies. This can be also corroborated by previous research that for the second-generation Dutch Hindustanis, the affective ties to India function as ‘source cultures’ rather than as ‘Home’ (Gowricharn, 2009). There are no specific spots in India called Bollywood, unlike its US-American counterpart. There are, however, a growing amount of locations that are identified as being quintessentially ‘Bollywood’ locations based on the indelible association film tourists draw between locations and Bollywood films. These ‘places of the imagination’ (Reijnders, 2011) have become a standard part of the diaspora’s Bollywood tourism experience.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed that Bollywood cinema has a considerable influence on the imagination of India among the Dutch Hindustanis. For participants who were born in Suriname and migrated to the Netherlands from the 1970s onwards, or who were born in the Netherlands itself, Bollywood cinema is a major reference point to Indian landscape and culture. For the older participants who did not visit India during their youth and only started going there in their middle age, for a long time, the images of India as propagated by Bollywood cinema have been a rather dominant source for defining the participants' relationship and imaginations toward India, which ensured a sense of familiarity when they arrived in India. This also holds true for the younger participants who have never been there but rely on the mediatized imaginaries created by Bollywood. This at times led to a dissonance between the imaginaries of India idealized by Bollywood and their real-life experiences in India. The younger participants not only relied on cinema for comfort, but also appropriated it to their present context by utilizing Bollywood elements in their current cultural expression. Many participants adopt cultural codes concerning the 'Indianness' from cinema and practice rituals, clothing and religious festivals (Verstappen & Rutten, 2007).

The mediatized presence of Bollywood culture often tends to weigh heavier in comparison with Suriname, making Indian identity more relatable, approachable and 'workable' as a tool for identity work. This also meant that Bollywood cinema was a source of cultural education, but also provided a 'pull' factor to make the participants travel to India to soothe their cultural affiliations and not really in search of 'Home'. However, the recent trend among Bollywood producers to shoot movies outside India slightly hindered the process of imagining India through cinema for the participants. This results in them falling back on the classic Bollywood films from 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, to keep them engaged with the materiality and authenticity of the homeland.

It became clear that through the repeated consumption of Bollywood cinema, the participants also became acquainted with different places and landscapes, stirring the desire to actually visit India. Many participants had a clear list of specific places they desired to visit. Particularly, Bollywood cinema turned out to be a predominant source of travel inspiration for most of the participants, as they designed their India trips based on associations with famous scenes from Bollywood's film history. These trips were not based on one movie or one particular scene, but on a string of movies that together formed a 'Bollywood filter' of India. In addition to film locations, these visitations included homes of famous Bollywood celebrities as well as film studio tours. Through this chapter, the concept of 'cinematic itineraries' is introduced to suggest these multi-sided and comprehensive film tourist practices based on the Bollywood lens, where not one film but a collective imaginary of the story-world of Bollywood, inspires travels for these diasporic audiences.

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Note

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