

Pottery at the Crossroads: Livelihood Insecurity and Intergenerational Occupational Mobility among the Kumbaran Community in Wayanad, Kerala

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Abstract: This paper examines the socio-economic condition of the Kumbaran pottery community in Wayanad district, Kerala, against the backdrop of widening livelihood insecurity, rural occupational transition, and the declining viability of hereditary crafts. Drawing on primary data from 60 respondents across the three taluks of Wayanad, the study analyses the weakening economic base of pottery and the growing gap between parental preference and the occupational choices of the younger generation. Only 28.3 per cent of respondents reported pottery as their principal source of income, reflecting the low, irregular, and seasonal returns from the craft. Although 71.7 per cent of parents preferred continuity in the traditional occupation, only 10 per cent reported interest among their children. The findings suggest that the decline of pottery in Wayanad is not merely an outcome of occupational withdrawal or loss of cultural attachment, but of declining economic viability under changing market and institutional conditions. Its future depends on sustained institutional support, technological adaptation, skill formation, improved access to raw materials, and stronger market linkages.

Keywords: Traditional Pottery; Kumbaran Community; Livelihood Insecurity; Intergenerational Occupational Mobility.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional crafts continue to occupy an important place in rural India not only as sources of income, but also as carriers of cultural memory, hereditary skill, and local identity (Ahlawat, 2024; Cooper, 2000). Among such crafts, pottery is one of the oldest and most deeply embedded occupations in village society. Yet, the continued survival of pottery can no longer be understood in cultural terms alone. In many regions, the occupation is under pressure from market contraction, industrial substitutes, technological change, and wider shifts in rural labour markets (Saha et al., 2025; Raj, 2025; Surendra et al., 2025). The question, therefore, is not simply whether traditional pottery survives as a cultural practice, but whether it remains economically viable as a livelihood for artisan households.

The decline of pottery as a viable occupation is closely connected with the broader process of intergenerational occupational mobility. In traditional artisan households,

younger members are increasingly moving away from hereditary work in search of regular income, better working conditions, and improved social mobility (Sumathi and Sujadevi, 2016). Such movement is not merely an outcome of changing aspirations; it is also shaped by the weak and unstable economic base of traditional occupations themselves. Earlier studies on pottery communities have shown that unstable income, occupational strain, weakening demand, and inadequate institutional support all contribute to this transition (Neelankavil and Pushpam, 2023; Bhavanishankar and Singhe, 2014; Singh et al., 2017). Occupational mobility in artisan communities must therefore be understood not simply as a social shift, but also as an economic response to the declining viability of hereditary work.

Kerala provides an important context for examining these issues. Despite high literacy, expanding non-farm opportunities, and wider social development, traditional occupations continue to survive in selected pockets, often under increasingly fragile economic conditions. In Wayanad

district, the Kumbaran pottery community retains a visible presence, and pottery continues to possess utilitarian as well as cultural significance. At the same time, field evidence indicates that only a limited number of families remain actively engaged in pottery production, suggesting a weakening of the hereditary occupational base. The district is therefore a useful setting for analysing how changing livelihood conditions, educational mobility, and institutional limitations are affecting the continuity of a traditional craft occupation.

Although the literature on pottery communities has discussed socio-economic conditions, cultural significance, and occupational decline, relatively few studies have examined intergenerational occupational mobility in a localised Kerala context, particularly in Wayanad. Existing studies show that pottery survives through a tension between cultural continuity and economic decline, and that its future increasingly depends on supportive institutions, technological adaptation, and alternative market linkages (Kotte and Surendra, 2016; Sikdar and Chaudhuri, 2015; Nath, 2018). However, the specific relationship between livelihood insecurity, occupational exit, and the future of hereditary pottery remains insufficiently examined in Wayanad.

Against this background, the present study examines the socio-economic condition of the Kumbaran pottery community in Wayanad district, with particular emphasis on intergenerational occupational mobility and the future of hereditary pottery. It argues that the present crisis of pottery is rooted primarily in the declining economic viability of the occupation rather than in a simple loss of cultural attachment. Pottery has already lost its central position in the household economy for a large proportion of respondents, institutional support remains weak in terms of both access and actual benefit, and a clear gap exists between the desire of the present generation to retain the occupation and the unwillingness of the younger generation to continue in direct production. At the same time, the findings point to the possibility of a transformed continuity through marketing, distribution, and other non-production roles. The paper thereby contributes to wider discussions on rural craft sustainability, informal labour transition, and the changing future of hereditary occupations in contemporary India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on traditional pottery communities in India suggests that pottery occupies a complex position as both a livelihood activity and a cultural practice. Studies on artisan communities repeatedly show that traditional crafts are sustained not merely by market demand, but also by inherited skill, caste-based occupational identity, and customary forms of knowledge transmission. Pottery, therefore, cannot be understood only in economic terms. It is deeply embedded in community life, ritual practice, local ecology, and hereditary systems of work. Anthropological and community-based

studies have drawn attention to this cultural dimension by showing that potters function as bearers of intangible cultural heritage and that pottery traditions can retain social significance even under conditions of declining economic return (Cooper, 2000; Foster, 1956; Kotte and Surendra, 2016; Sikdar and Chaudhuri, 2015). At the same time, these studies make clear that cultural attachment alone cannot sustain the occupation when its material conditions deteriorate.

A major concern running through the literature is the weakening livelihood base of pottery. Studies indicate that pottery households increasingly face low income, uncertain earnings, shrinking market demand, and intensified competition from factory-made substitutes. These pressures have reduced the capacity of pottery to function as a stable hereditary occupation. Pottery workers generally operate within informal production systems marked by limited capital, weak bargaining power, and poor institutional support. Declining profitability, poor market access, raw-material constraints, and the spread of substitute goods have together undermined the viability of pottery as a traditional livelihood (Raj, 2025; Surendra et al., 2025; Saha et al., 2025). The crisis of pottery, therefore, cannot be treated simply as a decline of traditional interest; it reflects a broader condition of livelihood insecurity within a changing economic environment.

Within this broader context, intergenerational occupational mobility emerges as an important theme. Studies show that younger generations are increasingly moving away from hereditary work towards education, wage employment, and other non-traditional occupations. While such movement is often read as part of wider rural social mobility, it is also shaped by weaknesses within the occupation itself. Sumathi and Sujadevi (2016), in their study of the pottery industry in Kottayam district, observed that younger members were moving out of the craft because of high physical strain, occupational risk, and unstable income, while the availability of more regular and secure earnings elsewhere acted as an important pull factor. Neelankavil and Pushpam (2023) similarly show that pottery continues to survive as a marker of cultural identity in Kerala even as its economic base weakens. These studies indicate that occupational mobility is not merely an outcome of changing aspirations; it is also a response to the declining capacity of the occupation to provide stable and dignified livelihoods.

Occupational transition, however, does not necessarily lead to secure or improved livelihoods. In some cases, movement away from pottery involves a shift from one vulnerable informal occupation to another. This is especially visible in studies highlighting the gendered dimension of occupational change. Bhavanishankar and Singhe (2014), in their study of Kulal women in Dakshina Kannada, found that women moved from pottery into beedi rolling under conditions of poverty, indebtedness, and weakening returns from the traditional occupation. Although the transition generated income, it also exposed them to low wages, health

risks, and continued insecurity. Singh et al. (2017), in the case of Manipur, likewise document a decline in pottery alongside movement into other occupations under the influence of technological change and globalisation. These studies caution against treating occupational mobility as synonymous with upward mobility.

Technological change is another important dimension. Some studies portray modernisation as a disruptive force that displaces manual production and further marginalises artisan communities. Yet technology need not have uniformly negative effects. Nath (2018), in a study of pottery communities in Assam, shows that pottery continues to possess both socio-cultural and economic significance even while suffering from poverty, poor market support, and inadequate modernisation. The study also suggests that technological change can improve production and livelihoods when supportive conditions are present. Broader work on crafts and rural heritage similarly points to the importance of design support, market adaptation, training, tourism, and wider product outreach (Jayalakshmi and Vijayasree, 2025). The effects of technology are therefore mediated by the institutional and market environment within which artisan households operate.

Weak institutional support remains a recurring structural constraint. Across studies, major issues include poor access to training, low awareness of government schemes, weak collective organisation, lack of certification, difficulty in obtaining raw materials, and inadequate policy implementation. Even where state support exists in principle, its effective reach among pottery workers appears limited. This gap between the formal presence of schemes and the actual delivery of support is important because it directly affects occupational viability. The survival of pottery depends not only on community willingness or cultural persistence, but also on whether institutions can reduce production constraints, improve market access, and strengthen the material conditions of artisan work.

Taken together, the literature points to a consistent pattern. Pottery communities across India continue to retain cultural relevance, but their economic base has weakened under the combined effects of market contraction, production constraints, technological unevenness, and changing aspirations. Previous studies provide useful insights into the socio-economic condition of potters, the cultural significance of hereditary skill, the gendered nature of occupational transition, and the role of institutions in craft survival. Yet relatively fewer studies examine how these dimensions intersect in the specific context of intergenerational occupational mobility in Kerala, particularly in Wayanad. The gap is therefore both empirical and analytical: there remains insufficient understanding of how livelihood insecurity, institutional weakness, and changing aspirations interact to shape occupational exit and the uncertain future of hereditary pottery in a localised setting.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study examines the socio-economic condition of the pottery-making Kumbaran community in Wayanad district and the changing pattern of intergenerational occupational mobility within the community. It is based on a cross-sectional field survey supplemented by qualitative enquiry. Wayanad district was selected because pottery continues there as a hereditary occupation, although under conditions of economic decline and occupational transition. The field survey covered the taluks of Vythiri, Sulthan Bathery, and Mananthavady.

The pilot study was conducted in October 2024 and the main field survey was completed in May 2025. The study population consisted of members of the Kumbaran pottery community living in selected pottery settlements of the district. Purposive sampling was adopted because the community is not evenly distributed across Wayanad and pottery-linked households are concentrated in specific localities. The settlements were identified through preliminary field visits, local enquiry, and known concentrations of Kumbaran households. A total of 60 respondents were covered. Respondents included household heads, active workers, and other adult household members who could provide reliable information on the occupational history and present socio-economic condition of the household. Key informant interviews were also conducted with master potters and knowledgeable community members.

Primary data were collected through a pre-tested structured questionnaire, personal interviews, field observation, and in-depth discussions. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Responses were recorded directly in Google Forms during face-to-face interviews, while detailed observations and explanatory responses were maintained separately as field notes. Secondary material was drawn from books, journal articles, reports, and other relevant documents. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all respondents, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The data were coded, classified, and analysed using descriptive tools such as frequencies, percentages, tables, and graphs. Qualitative responses were interpreted thematically to support and contextualise the survey findings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The field data indicate that the traditional pottery occupation among the Kumbaran community in Wayanad is undergoing a gradual but clear decline. Although pottery continues in certain settlements as a hereditary occupation, it no longer functions as the principal livelihood source for most households. The weakening of the occupation is visible in the low and irregular income derived from pottery, growing dependence on non-pottery livelihoods, seasonal production, limited institutional support, and declining interest among the

younger generation. The present condition of pottery in Wayanad must therefore be understood not as an isolated occupational problem, but as the outcome of wider social, economic, and institutional changes that have reduced the viability of the traditional craft economy.

➤ *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

The demographic profile provides an important background to the occupational transition discussed below.

One-third of respondents are above 50 years of age and another 26.7 per cent are aged 31–50, while 40 per cent are below 30. The sample is strongly male-dominated, with men accounting for 73.3 per cent of respondents. Educational attainment is uneven: 40 per cent have schooling below the fifth standard, whereas 21.7 per cent completed Plus Two and 16.7 per cent are graduates. The pattern therefore combines a substantial low-education segment with a younger and more educated presence within the community.

Table 1: Age, Sex and Educational Profile of Respondents (n=60)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Per cent
Age	18–23	9	15.0
	24–30	15	25.0
	31–50	16	26.7
	Above 50	20	33.3
Sex	Male	44	73.3
	Female	16	26.7
Educational attainment	Below 5th standard	24	40.0
	6th to 9th standard	8	13.3
	Matriculation	4	6.7
	Plus Two	13	21.7
	Graduate	10	16.7
	Other	1	1.7

Source: Field survey data.

➤ *Occupational Characteristics*

The occupational structure shows that pottery no longer occupies the central place it once held in the livelihood pattern of the community. Only 19 respondents (31.7 per cent) reported hereditary pottery as their present occupation, while larger numbers are distributed across wage labour, private employment, government service, other occupations, and the student category. The pattern suggests a movement towards

more diversified, though not necessarily more secure, forms of work. The relationship between education and occupation is also weak: among the 52 respondents currently engaged in an occupation, only 13.5 per cent reported that their present work was related to their educational background. The experience profile is polarised, with 36.7 per cent reporting 0–5 years of experience in traditional pottery and 35 per cent reporting more than 40 years.

Table 2: Occupational Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Number	Per cent
Present occupation (n=60)	Hereditary pottery	19	31.7
	Government service	2	3.3
	Private sector employment	8	13.3
	Coolie labour	15	25.0
	Other occupations	6	10.0
	Students	9	15.0
Present occupation related to educational background (n=52)	Yes	7	13.5
	No	45	86.5
Work experience in traditional pottery (n=60)	0–5 years	22	36.7
	6–20 years	3	5.0
	21–40 years	14	23.3
	Above 40 years	21	35.0

Source: Field survey data.

Note: For present occupation, the reported category frequencies sum to 59 although the stated base is n=60; the field figures are retained as recorded. The education–occupation question was asked only to respondents currently engaged in an occupation (n=52). Percentages are rounded.

➤ *Economic Condition and Livelihood Pattern of Respondent Households*

The income profile confirms the reduced economic role of pottery. Only 28.3 per cent of respondents reported pottery as their main source of income, while 71.7 per cent depended primarily on other sources. Income from pottery is both low and irregular: 43.3 per cent reported no income from pottery, and only 8.3 per cent earned ₹15,000 or more per month from

the craft. By contrast, 38.3 per cent reported monthly income of ₹15,000 or more from other sources. The reported increase in income during the past five years therefore cannot be interpreted as an improvement in pottery earnings alone; it appears to reflect the growing importance of alternative livelihoods. Pottery now functions more often as a supplementary activity than as a stable economic base.

Table 3: Income Pattern and Livelihood Dependence of Respondent Households (n=60)

Category	Response/Income group	Number	Per cent
Pottery as main source of income	Yes	17	28.3
	No	43	71.7
Monthly income from pottery	Below ₹2,500	2	3.3
	₹2,500–4,999	9	15.0
	₹5,000–9,999	12	20.0
	₹10,000–14,999	6	10.0
	₹15,000 and above	5	8.3
	No income from pottery	26	43.3
Monthly income from other sources	Below ₹2,500	5	8.3
	₹2,500–4,999	9	15.0
	₹5,000–9,999	3	5.0
	₹10,000–14,999	3	5.0
	₹15,000 and above	23	38.3
	No income from other sources	17	28.3
Trend in income during the past five years	Increased	39	65.0
	Decreased	12	20.0
	No change	9	15.0

Source: Field survey data.

Note: Percentages are calculated on the base of 60 respondents and may not total exactly 100 because of rounding.

➤ *Seasonality of Pottery Production and Income Stability*

The seasonal pattern of production provides an additional explanation for the weak contribution of pottery to household income. Production is concentrated mainly in the dry months from January to May and again in November and December, while it declines sharply during the monsoon period. Reported

production activity is almost absent from July to October and remains very limited in June. This seasonal interruption makes it difficult for households to depend on pottery as a regular source of livelihood and reinforces dependence on supplementary occupations.

Table 4: Seasonal Pattern of Pottery Production (Multiple Responses; n=36)

Month	Respondents mentioning the month	Per cent
January	35	97.2
February	35	97.2
March	36	100.0
April	36	100.0
May	34	94.4
June	2	5.6
July	0	0.0
August	0	0.0
September	0	0.0
October	0	0.0
November	32	88.9
December	35	97.2

Source: Field survey data.

Note: Multiple responses; percentages are based on n=36 and do not sum to 100.

➤ Institutional Access and Financial Vulnerability

The survey reveals a clear gap between the presence of support measures and their actual reach among pottery households. Although 61.7 per cent of respondents were aware of government support schemes, only 33.3 per cent had received any benefit. Access to training and formal recognition is also weak: only 20 per cent had participated in pottery workshops and 13.3 per cent possessed government certification in pottery. Collective support is limited, with 25

per cent reporting union membership and only 15 per cent receiving support from the union. Awareness of the Gramodyog Vikas Yojana was only 5 per cent, and none of the respondents had become beneficiaries. At the same time, 28.3 per cent reported loans or debts related to the traditional occupation. The vulnerability of pottery households is therefore shaped not only by low and uncertain income, but also by the weak penetration of institutional support systems that could improve occupational viability.

Table 5: Institutional Support and Financial Vulnerability of Respondents (n=60)

Indicator	Yes (No.)	Yes (%)	No (No.)	No (%)
Participated in pottery workshops	12	20.0	48	80.0
Aware of government support schemes	37	61.7	23	38.3
Beneficiary of government schemes	20	33.3	40	66.7
Possess government certification in pottery	8	13.3	52	86.7
Union membership	15	25.0	45	75.0
Receive support from union	9	15.0	51	85.0
Aware of Gramodyog Vikas Yojana	3	5.0	57	95.0
Beneficiary of Gramodyog Vikas Yojana	0	0.0	60	100.0
Have loans/debts related to traditional occupation	17	28.3	43	71.7

Source: Field survey data.

➤ Intergenerational Occupational Mobility and Youth Orientation

The survey points to a clear break between the preference of the present generation and the orientation of the younger generation. While 71.7 per cent of respondents stated that they would like the next generation to continue in traditional pottery, only 10 per cent of the children covered by the relevant question were reported to be interested in doing so. The gap suggests a marked pattern of intergenerational movement away from direct pottery production. The reasons

identified by respondents indicate that the shift is shaped less by cultural indifference than by livelihood considerations: income was the most frequently cited factor influencing career choice, followed by education, ambition, and dignity. At the same time, 83.3 per cent believed that educated youth could contribute to the distribution and marketing of final products. What is declining, therefore, is not necessarily all attachment to the community occupation, but the willingness to remain in direct production under conditions of low and uncertain returns.

Table 6: Intergenerational Occupational Mobility and Youth Orientation towards Pottery

Indicator	Category	Number	Per cent	Base
Respondents willing to let next generation continue in traditional pottery	Yes	43	71.7	60
	No	17	28.3	60
Children interested in continuing the traditional occupation	Yes	4	10.0	40
	No	36	90.0	40
Factors influencing career choice of the younger generation*	Income	55	91.7	60
	Education	49	81.7	60
	Ambition	43	71.7	60
	Dignity	34	56.7	60
	Other	1	1.7	60
Parental preference regarding respondent's future	Traditional job	31	51.7	60
	Education	29	48.3	60
Opinion that educated youth can help in distribution/marketing of final products	Yes	50	83.3	60
	No	10	16.7	60

Source: Field survey data.

Note: *Multiple responses were recorded for factors influencing the career choice of the younger generation; percentages therefore do not add up to 100. The question on children's interest was answered by 40 respondents.

➤ *Adoption of Innovations and Technologies in Pottery Production and Distribution*

Technological change in the pottery sector is partial and uneven. Among respondents engaged in pottery production, 70.6 per cent reported the use of some form of modern technology, while 29.4 per cent continued to depend on traditional methods. Electric potter wheels were used by 58.8 per cent of the relevant respondents, indicating some

modernisation of the production process where technology can reduce physical effort and save time. Technological change is far weaker in marketing and distribution. Of the 17 respondents who answered the question on online distribution, only one reported using online platforms to sell final products. Innovation is therefore largely confined to production, while digital and market-oriented adaptation remains extremely limited.

Table 7: Use of Modern Technologies in Pottery Production and Product Distribution

Indicator	Category	Number	Per cent	Base
Use of modern technology in production	Yes	24	70.6	34
	No	10	29.4	34
Use of electric potter wheel	Yes	20	58.8	34
	No	14	41.2	34
Use of online platforms for product distribution	Yes	1	5.9	17
	No	16	94.1	17

Source: Field survey data.

Note: The production-technology and electric-wheel questions were asked only to respondents engaged in pottery production (n=34). The online-distribution question was answered by 17 respondents.

➤ *Problems and Prospects of the Traditional Pottery Occupation*

The crisis of traditional pottery in Wayanad appears to be rooted more in production-side and institutional constraints than in the final sale of products. Shortage of raw materials emerged as the most serious problem, reported by all respondents, followed by lack of government support and high production cost. Industrialisation and shortage of labour were also mentioned, though by smaller proportions. This indicates that the weakening of the craft is closely tied to the erosion of its material and institutional base rather than to any single

isolated factor. At the same time, traditional pottery has not entirely lost its functional relevance: 75 per cent of respondents stated that traditional pots are still used mainly for cooking. Yet this continuing use is accompanied by a strongly pessimistic outlook. Almost all respondents believed that the traditional pottery industry may become extinct within the next 20 years. Significantly, 96.7 per cent also believed that pottery workshops could encourage younger people to enter the occupation. The overall picture is therefore one of a craft that retains limited everyday relevance but faces an uncertain future in the absence of meaningful support.

Table 8: Perceptions of Potters on Major Challenges and Future Prospects of the Traditional Pottery Industry

Dimension	Category/Response	Number	Per cent	Base
Major challenges faced by the traditional pottery industry*	Lack of raw materials	60	100.0	60
	Lack of government support	53	88.3	60
	High production cost	52	86.7	60
	Industrialisation	21	35.0	60
	Lack of labour input	16	26.7	60
	Others	2	3.3	60
	Low selling options	1	1.7	60
Use of traditional pots for cooking	Mostly	45	75.0	60
	Partially	15	25.0	60
Opinion that the traditional pottery industry may become extinct within the next 20 years	Yes	59	98.3	60
	No	1	1.7	60
Opinion that pottery workshops can encourage the younger generation to enter the occupation	Yes	58	96.7	60
Difficulty in marketing pottery products	Yes	16	26.7	60
	No	44	73.3	60

Source: Field survey data.

Note: *Multiple responses were recorded for major challenges; percentages therefore do not add up to 100. For the workshop question, the source table reports only the 'Yes' response (58; 96.7 per cent) and does not separately report the remaining response category.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings should be read in the light of the study design. The sample is limited to 60 purposively selected respondents from identified Kumbaran settlements in Wayanad, and the analysis is primarily descriptive. The results therefore provide a focused account of livelihood and occupational change within the surveyed community rather than a statistically generalisable estimate for all pottery households in Kerala.

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The analysis shows that the decline of traditional pottery in Wayanad is not merely the decline of one hereditary occupation, but the weakening of an entire livelihood system. The problem extends beyond low income to include seasonal instability, weak intergenerational continuity, limited institutional penetration, and uneven technological and market adaptation. Pottery continues in some households, but increasingly as a supplementary activity rather than as the principal basis of livelihood. The occupational shift visible within the Kumbaran community is therefore not simply a matter of changing preference; it reflects the reduced viability of pottery under present economic and institutional conditions.

The policy implications follow directly from these constraints. First, reliable access to clay and other raw materials is essential because raw-material shortage is the only problem reported by every respondent. Second, the large gap between awareness of government support and actual receipt of benefits indicates the need for more effective last-mile delivery, particularly in training, certification, and access to schemes such as the Gramodyog Vikas Yojana. Third, the limited use of online platforms suggests considerable scope for support in digital marketing, product promotion, collective branding, and distribution. The high level of support for pottery workshops also indicates that training can play a role in transferring skills to younger members, especially when combined with design development and market-oriented production.

The findings do not suggest that pottery has lost all relevance. Traditional pots continue to be used in everyday life, and respondents recognise a possible role for educated youth in marketing and distribution. The future of the sector, therefore, need not be framed as a choice between extinction and the preservation of pottery in an unchanged form. A more realistic path lies in economically viable continuity: retaining core craft knowledge while improving technology, institutional support, market access, and the quality of work. Unless such support is institutionalised in a sustained manner, the present trend points towards continued erosion of traditional pottery in Wayanad.

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