

THE ENIGMA OF AMERICAN INDIANS

by

Mg. Dir. Dr. Baldeo Sahai

Summary

There were several waves of migrations from the Old World to the New since over 10,000 years ago, and also continued later. It is now generally accepted that the peoples who went there were from South Asian region like Polynesia, China, Malay and should have been from India as well. The Mayas are credited with awesome knowledge of astronomy and mathematics including the concept of zero. This is widely acknowledged that the Hindus of India were the first in the world to devise numerals including zero. Their methods of measuring time date back to the fourteenth century BC and had been constantly updated. As such, it strongly suggests that Indians had also migrated to Central and South Americas at some point of time. Both civilizations have several other common characteristics, customs and religious beliefs and symbols.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS made a mistake when on landing in Hispaniola in 1492, he took that land to be Indies. But he proved prophetic when he named the inhabitants he found there as Indians because it is quite probable that the people of India at some point of time did migrate to those parts of the world. Since then the appellation has stuck on and for many visitors to that region, the 'Indians', with their exotic art and architecture, rites and rituals, way of life, appear to be far more interesting than the westerners who go round like anywhere else. These 'Indians' it has now come to light, migrated to these parts thousands of years ago from the Old World. In recent past, vigorous efforts have been made literally to

dig up their past, examine and analyse their artefacts and fathom their faiths and beliefs. Their first landing place appears to be Mexico from where they might have migrated to Peru, Gautemala, Bolivia, Belize, down to central Chile and other areas. The question about the original home of the 'Indians' is still open and under discussion. The tools being employed to discover the truth are the archaeologists' axe, anthropological studies, analysis of physical features, religious symbols and cultural mores.

Most of the historians are of the view that these 'Indians' came from South East Asia, some say North-West Asia. (1) Sir Robert

Marett – who classifies their culture into various periods, thinks that their ancestors “did come from Asia, although not from the East Indies”. (2) They were established in the New World “probably for at least 10,000 years, and possibly a good deal more.” (3) Bankes pushes the period back to “38,000 BC ... earliest in the caves of Andes,” (4) and Galenkamp to “40,000 years.” (5) Specifically discussing the ‘Indians’ of Peru, Sir Robert hints at the possibility that at different periods of their history the Peruvians might have had some contacts with Mexico and Central America “where ‘Indian’ civilizations of a high order were developed.” (6) Analysing the physical features of the Yucatan Mayas, Morley holds that some of them “strongly suggest the original north-eastern Asiatic origins of the Maya race, as “indeed of all American Indians” (7) Among these characteristics he mentions: a) the epicanthic eye fold; b) the Mongolian spot; and (c) the line patterns in the palms of the hands. The epicanthic fold, he explains, is an internal fold of the eye which is very characteristic of eastern Asiatics. The Mongolian spot is an irregular –shaped spot located at the base of the spine, bluish or purple in colour but fading to a slaty shade as it gradually disappears. “It is found throughout eastern Asia, and is very common among Maya babies of Northern Yucatan”, he adds. He took great pains in examining the lines of their palms and comparing them with the lines on the palms of east Asians. These indeed seem to be very conclusive and reliable observations to establish the migrations of East Asian peoples to Central and South American countries. Morley says that judged by such ‘basic criteria’ as stature, colour, headshape and hair all Maya-speaking groups would seem to have sprung originally from the same common ancestral stock”. (8) Among other common characteristics of the two peoples – Yucatan Maya and Asians – Morley mentions monogamy as a rule, personal scrupulous cleanliness, unusual honesty, generosity and hospitality, superstitious nature, pantheon of

gods and goddesses (p230), and so on. Marett also affirms: “I noticed that the Mexican Indians had a distinctly Oriental look about them.” (9) If the American Indians came from Southeast Asia as long ago as 10 to 40,000 years ago, three questions arise – how did they come, what route they took, and whom did they find on arrival? According to H.G. Wells the “earliest boats and ships must have come into use some 25-30,000 years ago” (10) and adds “there were ships upon the Red Sea and there were ships on the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf by 7000 BC.” (11) He does not mention ships on the Indian Ocean or on the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. But Villiers, who circumnavigated the earth in 1934 and has greater claim to know about the seas and sailings, asserts that real ships originated elsewhere along the shores of Indian Ocean.” (12) He is certain that “long before the period when any reconstruction can be based on written or sculptured records, there were seagoing ships, and some of them at least were plying for passengers and cargo in the monsoonal waters of the Indian Ocean”. (13) Needless to say that Indians were among the pioneers in the art of navigation and did not sail only on the Arabian Sea but were also sailing to the countries of the South China Sea via the Bay of Bengal from the pre-historic times.

SCHOLARS generally agree that the route followed by the early Asians to Americas was via the Bering Sea and the Bering Straits (Sir Robert, p32, R.H.K.Marett, p40). The seafarers would have hugged the shores of China for a short distance, gone along Japan, Kurile Islands, Kamchatka and then crossed the Bering Straits near the Arctic in the late glacial times” at some remote time, perhaps ten, perhaps twenty thousand years ago when the ice of the last great Glaciation had receded sufficiently to allow their passage”. (14)

This sea-route might not have been the only one undertaken by the immigrants. That

route could have been easier for the peoples of China, northern Russia and Mangolia but not for the Polynesians who might have preferred to sail straight across the Pacific Ocean. It is also possible that there was at that distant time a chain of islands connecting Polynesia to the western coast of South America. Easter Island may be just a remnant of an archipelago which has since been swallowed by the sea. As the islands were sinking, the inhabitants escaped to the nearest coast. Moreover, if the Asian immigrants had come to America crossing the Bering Straits, they would have first reached Canada then sailed down the coast of America. But not many 'Indians' are reported from those parts and their civilizations are mostly concentrated in Central America and the West Coast of South America. (15)

An Intricate Tapestry

AS TO THE TYPE of ethnic people the immigrants encountered on arrival, we may safely start with certain assumptions. One, there was no single one-time migration from the Old World to the New but waves of various voyages. Two, all those who went there were not from one country or region but several. Three, the American Indians do not display a single integrated cultural trait but different characteristics which evolved through the cross-fertilization of ideas with various immigrants. Thus, what we see today is a tapestry of exotic warp and weft exhibiting interesting intricate patterns – a cauldron of cultures as it were. The cultures cover a wide range beginning with the hunting, fishing and food-gathering activities called the Archaic period. The emergence of agriculture leads to Preclassic or Formative period (2000 BC to 250 AD) comparable to Neolithic cultures in Europe and Asia. The Late Preclassic horizons are also referred to as Miraflores phase in some Maya regions of Guatemala. Finally, the Classic and the Late Classic constitute the civilization of the elite showing refined art creations, elaborate ceremonial architecture, and a fairly good

knowledge of time measurement, astronomy and mathematics.

IT IS MOST unfortunate that much of the heritage of mankind has been lost by ruthless invaders who made it a point to destroy the culture of the conquered. Since the conquerors happen to have more modern weapons they take it for granted that they are also superior in wisdom and values. It has been happening from the earliest times to the modern days leaving mankind much the poorer. In early sixteenth century when the Spaniards landed in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in Mexico, Herman Cortés indulged in wholesale slaughter of the inhabitants. (5) They systematically tore down "all the old temples and replacing them by churches" (16) – 365 of them, one for each day of the year. Recently, the Talibans in Afghanistan blew up the seventy-feet high cliff-face friezes of the Buddha in spite of vociferous objections from many countries. The UNESCO should acquire more teeth to firmly stop such destruction of human heritage.

Since the twentieth century, the Europeans and American archaeologists, anthropologists and historians – including Spaniards and some ethnic people – have been trying to piece together the civilizations of the Mayas, Toltecs, Aztecs, Incas and others. Numerous sites have been excavated which have yielded a lot of material. On account of their education and upbringing, these scholars tend to examine the articles unearthed with reference only to Greece and Rome. The refined Mayas are called "Greeks" and the aggressive Aztecs are "Romans". The clay figurines found around the valley of Mexico are considered "most likely the equivalent of the Roman *lares et penates*..." (17). When it is generally agreed that the ancestors of American Indians came from Southeast Asian region "and Mexican Indians had distinctly Oriental look", (18) it should have been natural to compare these artefacts with those found in that area. While tarring the

home of original immigrants many places have been mentioned – “the Pacific islands, Malaya, China, or even Japan”. (19) – but not India. If any of the intellectuals had cared to compare the Mexican and Mayan ancient civilizations as they exist today - and what has been excavated - with the art, architecture, signs and symbols of India, they might have struck a gold mine and the analysis would have been most revealing and rewarding. But for the general run of western scholars, India does not exist.

Comparison with Indian Artefacts

We shall try to fill that gap and analyse some of the outstanding features of American Indian civilizations with reference to Indian artefacts. The entire habitation of these ‘Indians’ is scattered with the so-called pyramids. By now it has been confirmed that they have no connection whatsoever with the pyramids of Egypt. In our view it is totally misleading to call them ‘pyramids’. Actually these are astronomical instruments to observe the phases of the sun and the moon as found in the stone observatories of India. As late as the eighteenth century, Maharaja Jai Singh of Jaipur (Rajasthan) had set up such observatories based on ancient treatises on astronomy at places like New Delhi, Ujjain and Jaipur. The first systematic book on Hindu astronomy was composed by Maharsi (great sage) Lagadha between 1400 and 1200 BC (Colebrooke, 1410 BC; Prof. Whitney, 1338 BC; Prof. Max Muller, about 300 BC). His work, *Vedānga Jyotiśa* also carries a chapter on astronomical instruments. The highest construction at Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico, amusingly called “House of the Magicians” (20) – is like *Brhat Samrat Yantra*, or the Huge Emperor of Dials. It is an equinoctial dial with a triangular gnomon (pillar of sundial showing time by its shadow on marked surface) flanked on either side by a quadrant of a circle parallel to the plane of equator, misunderstood as ‘masked panels’. The edges of the quadrants are graduated in hours

and minutes as well as in degrees and each edge of the gnomon was originally traced with two scales of tangents. Solar time is thus obtained with its day-to-day variations.

THESE INSTRUMENTS can be studied at Jantar Mantar on Parliament Street, New Delhi. Figure 1 is in New Delhi, Figure 6 in Uxmal (Yucatan, Mexico). Both are so similar yet so apart – a few thousand km. away in space and more than 2000 years or so past in time. Figure 2 at Jantar Mantar combines four astronomical instruments: a) the centre one indicating meridian at two places in Europe and one each in Japan and Pacific Ocean; b) *Samrat Yantra* on either side; c) *Daksinottara Bhatti Yantra* on east wall; and d) *Karka rasi valaya* on the north wall indicating entry of Sun in Cancer. Figure 3 is another variety of the so-called ‘pyramid’ actually another instrument (*yantra*) showing phases of the Sun on the white curved wall. Only Wright gives a faint echo of this remarkable instrument, and the general purpose of the so-called pyramids, when he says: “Some of the pyramids in the centre of the country show in their construction a relationship to the time calculations of their builders”. (21) By carefully observing phases of the sun and the moon and compiling that record over years, the Mayas worked out accurate length of a tropical year as 365.24 days and that of a month as 29.52 days. Then followed the Maya calendar year, or *haab*, composed of 19 months – 18 months of 20 days each and 1 closing month of 5 days making a total of 365 days. (22) (for details see Morley pp.265-76). Morley is of the view that the elaborate Maya chronological system comprising *haab* and *tzolkin* “was the work of a single mind, possibly working with a few associates”. (23) This seems to us far-fetched as it anticipates thorough knowledge of mathematics and a well-established system of education. Information about acquiring such knowledge is not available in the works of western authors, nor any documentary or archaeological evidence has



Figure 1: Astronomical Instrument at Jantar Mantar



Figure 2: Astronomical Instrument at Jantar Mantar



Figure 3: Astronomical Instrument at Jantar Mantar

been discovered. However, it is said that Mayas had “awesome knowledge of the movements of the heavenly bodies, ability to predict eclipses, the appearances and disappearances of Venus from the eastern and western skies” (24) Wright also testifies to the astounding knowledge of Mayas of “mathematics including the use of zero” (25) and astronomy. Did they develop this knowledge independently or obtained it from elsewhere?

IN INDIA the composition of Jyotiś Vedāṅga was followed by the preparation of eighteen Siddhantas, or treatises on astronomy and mathematics, initially treated as a common subject. Of these, five Siddhantas are valuable among which Surya Siddhanta is the most important. It mentions methods of calculating meridians, equinoxes, solstices, planetary motions of the sun and the moon along with the principles of mathematics. Indians were the first in the world to devise numerals and the concept of zero – shunya – as well as the decimal system. Prof. C.B. Halsted emphasises the vital significance of zero. He says: “The importance of the creation of the zero mark can never be exaggerated. This giving to airy nothing not merely a local habitation and a name, a picture, a symbol, but helpful power, is the characteristic of the Hindu race from whence it sprang.” (quoted in *History of Hindu Mathematics* by B. Datta and A.N. Singh, 1935). Morley also points out “...that positional mathematics and the conception of zero which it involves had been developed but once in human history, namely by the Hindus who devised the decimal notation with its accompanying numerical symbols about the eighth century of the Christian Era. (26) In our opinion the invention of numerals and zero by Hindus was much earlier. Aryabhatta I, the most celebrated astronomer and mathematician of India, was born in 476 AD and his masterpiece Aryabhatiya was composed in 500 AD. He gave a turning point to the study of astronomy by applying his own formulae of

mathematics for solving astronomical problems. He also invented algebra and discovered algebraic solutions of quadratic equations and the theory of pulveriser. Thus, Indians have an unbroken tradition in the study of mathematics and astronomy since the early fifteenth century BC.

In art, the fine frieze of God Zoömorph from Quirigua, Izabal, Guatemala, could pass as a perfect copy of an Indian God. Actually he is the representation of the Kurma avatar (Tortoise Incarnation) of Lord Viśnu. The cross-legged posture is typically Indian, so is the face – except for the local variation of slightly slanting eyes – and artistic embellishments, especially of the crown reflecting the style of Amaravati friezes of India (Figure 4). The figure of the lady of Leyden Plate (Figure 5) is remarkable for linear rhythm, the Indian nose-ring along with other ornaments and an elaborate coiffure reminding us of the hair style of ladies depicted in Ajanta murals. She could pass on as a lady of an elite Indian family. As in India, the American Indians have a pantheon of gods and goddesses. There is a rain-god, war-god, death-god, corn-god and even a goddess for child-birth and weaving-Ixchel, wife of Itzamna, head of the Maya Pantheon (see Morley, Plate 29). There are many common symbols in the civilizations of India and those of Maya, Aztec, Toltec etc. Take the motif of serpent, for example, which pops up everywhere in these civilizations and has been dominating Egyptian and Indian mythology.

Cotton Found in America

WE MAY MENTION a minor point which like a flash of lightning throws light on the migrations of Indians to Americas. The magnificent valley of Mexico was earlier surrounded by forests teeming with game and “by fields of maize and cotton”. (27) Where did cotton come from ? Ragozin assert that cotton plant in ancient times was found only in India. (28) Schoff asserts that “cotton is native in India and woven into cloth by the



Figure 4: God Zoömorph – Like Tortoise Incarnation of Visnu



**Figure 5: The Lady of the Leyden Plate;
a carved Jade pendant; the earliest dated
known object from Maya area**

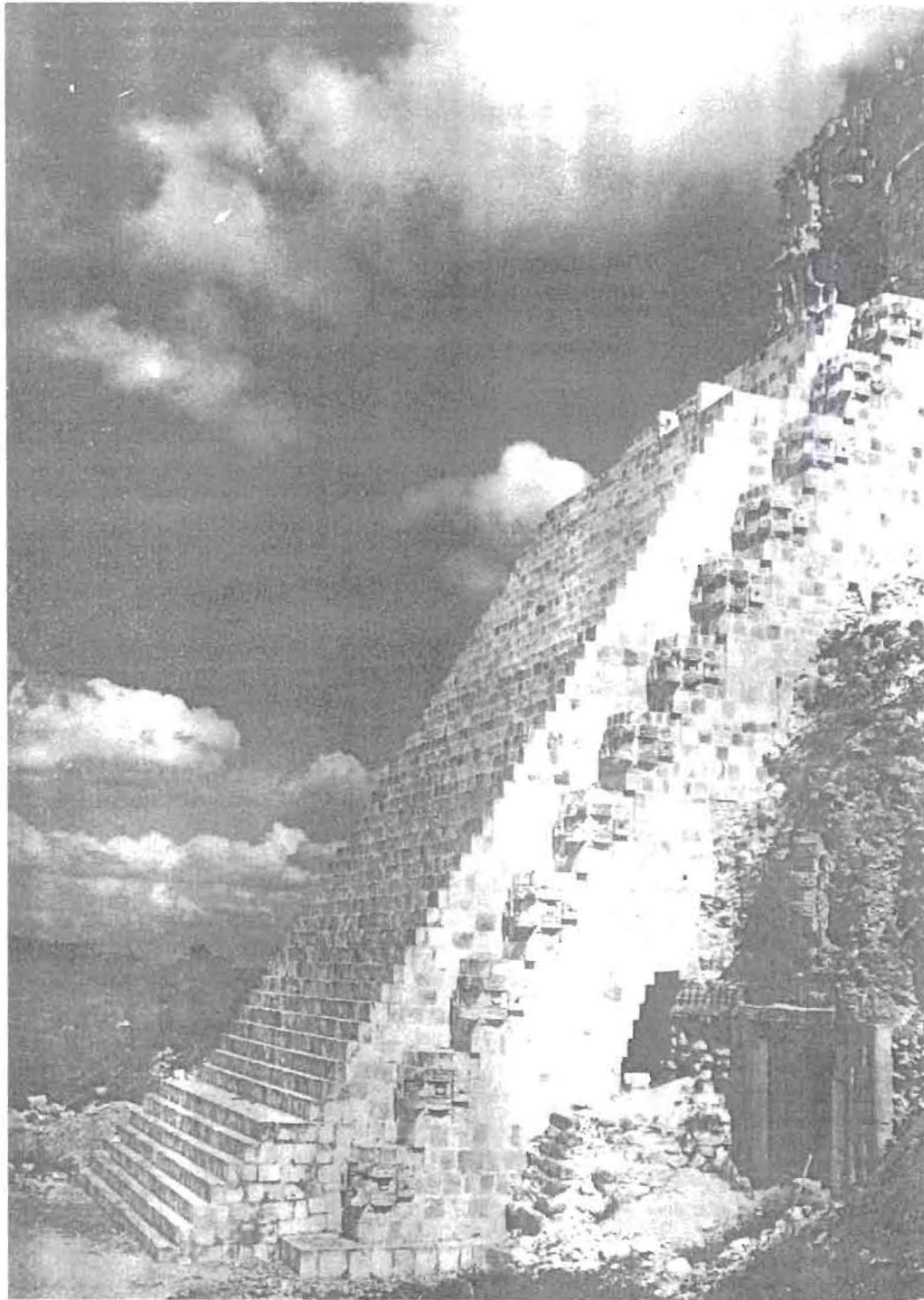


Figure 6: House of the Magician, Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico

natives of that country before the dawn of history". (29) He quotes from the Hibbert Lectures of Prof A.H. Sayce, who says "..... it was exported by sea to the head of the Persian Gulf in the fourth millennium BC; and it found its way very early to Egypt". (30) In fact, cotton weaving industry mainly contributed to the wealth of ancient India. The well-known British historian, J.W. Hewitt, late Commissioner of Chota Nagpur (India), specifically mentions that Indians had gone to America. He says: Sia Kapina did not grow rice, but spun cotton, a dry crop, over the land, thus showing that they came from India to America, for cotton is an indigenous plant of India, first used for weaving purposes in India and China, whence it was brought to America by the migrating races." (31) (The italics is by the author of the book).

FOR INDIANS, who were competent shipbuilders and expert seafarers, making a voyage to Americas was not a problem. The port of Lothal in Gujarat is dated C 2200 BC by Carbon-14 method. There is a chain of other ports on the western and eastern coasts. On the west, they had been trading with Arab countries and the eastern coast of Africa, and in the east navigating to Polynesia and the South China Sea regions from times immemorial. Prince Siddharta, born in 623 BC, renounced his family and became the Buddha, Enlightened, at the age of thirty. Since the fifth century BC the Buddhist missionaries had been going to distant lands preaching his message. In the first century BC was founded the first Hindu Kingdom in Funan, modern Kampuchea, which steadily spread to the neighbouring countries: Srivijaya and Shailendras, the successors of Funan, ruled over even Borneo and Celebes islands in the Far East. Therefore, it is almost certain that Indians went by sea to the Central and South American countries.

Conclusion

Our surmise is that the civilizations of American Indians did not grow out of the soil but were mostly imported readymade from the Old World. That country, just because of the presence of so-called 'pyramids', could not be only Egypt. Marett rightly points out that "the Mexican structure (of the pyramids) has a flat top and serves as the foundation for a temple built upon its summit, whereas the Egyptian pyramid is a complete building in itself being a tomb for the burial of the dead." (32) The pyramids in fact were astronomical observatories adapted from India (Figures 1 to 3). There are other aspects of their cultures and customs on which the stamp of India cannot be denied. The cultures of other countries like Egypt and China, also had their influence.

The earliest migrations to Americas, it appears, were from Polynesian region, may be via the Bering Straits, or straight across the Pacific. A wave from Mongolia and China is likely which helped in introducing Maya hieroglyphic writing. The Indians should have gone first around the third century BC, if not earlier, in the Late Preclassic horizons when elite classes enjoyed an exalted social position. (33) During the reign of Sri Vijaya when Indian adventurers were obsessed with wanderlust, they must have again made a voyage to Central and South America fully trained in the latest mathematical formulae and astronomical knowledge to usher in the Classic Age.

THE PRESENT DAY American Indian is like a pulsating sedimentary rock with layers of several civilizations lying one upon the other. The experienced archaeologists may dig up a site here and a site there to unearth pieces of pottery, clay figurines and artefacts, and categorise them strata-wise to devise a

pattern. At times, a find may throw light on the way they then lived; at others the labour may end up in nothing. But the 'Indian' available at hand is a much more reliable material. Help him if possible but do not aggressively meddle with the way he lives and do not try to 'civilize' him. Pray, do not dismiss him as barbarian and destroy his objects of art which he adores but to you are unintelligible. Observe his mannerism, his dress designs, his symbols and idols and the type of temples where he worships. Some of

these might serve as the key to open the doors of his subconscious. Some psychologists might even try regressive hypnotism. Establish empathy with him, delve deep into his mind and try to peep into the 'collective unconscious' – as C.G. Jung calls it – of his race. Methods like these might turn out to be more rewarding to find out earlier migrations to the Central and South American countries.

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About the Author

The author retired from Indian Information Service of Government of India (GOI) in 1976. He is a Fellow of Indian National Science Academy of GOI. He has written over a dozen well-researched books and published about 2000 articles and research papers. His book on Indian Shipping – A Historical Survey earned him a Doctorate of Philosophy in History from a university of the Netherlands. He has contributed several articles to 18-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism being published in the USA. Dr. Sahai worked with the Archaeological Survey of India to set up in 1948 a comprehensive exhibition : 5000 Years of Indian Art. He is an art critic, music critic, a poet and a Public Relations expert having taught PR in leading institutions for 18 years. His book : Public Relations – A Scientific Approach is prescribed in the curriculum of 36 Indian universities. He has travelled widely and won several awards, etc.etc.

Correspondence address:

Mg. Dir. Dr. Baldeo Sahai
SAMPARK
Public Relations Consultancy
B-93, Gulmohar Park
New Delhi – 110049
INDIA

Tel: No.6511677, 6967837
e-mail : dr_sahai@yahoo.co.in

