

To East with Love: How and Why the Beats Turned to Asia Post Second World War

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INTRODUCTION

Looking back at the 1950s it is evident that 50's was one of the most crucial decades of the 20th century, it was everything but perfect, it was a broken era, abundant with changes and preoccupied with the cold hearted relentlessness of the Cold War which ignored the regular American citizen. Forever in world's history 50's would be seen as the decade of the 'hydrogen jukeboxes'¹, it would be seen as the era when common reasoning was overshadowed by authority and mounting tides of materialism that, fuelled by consumerism, created a deceiving trap which engulfed everything, right from religion to Psychoanalysis.

While on one hand one half of the world was recuperating from the holocaust on the other America was victorious and in tact after the horror of the Second World War, it turned out to be not only the most powerful nation on earth, but it had been unchained from the paralyzing clutches of the great Depression of the 1930s forever. This victory however did not last for long, as America was soon occupied by the daunting task of worldwide revival and the spread of Russian communism. In order to stalk that dreadful 'Red Tide', a frenzied pursuit for nuclear superiority started. Not only at the international level, but also at home the 50s brought a new wave of transformation, it was an era of seductive compliance in which the middle class was profusely educated and remunerated by vested interests, the only price of personal and economic refuge was a deferential acceptance of puritan ethics. In a subversive way, however, the 50s was an era in which recognized confines of human potential were luminously revised by artists, poets, musicians, psychologists and activists most of them were never properly accredited. Collectively they contributed to a consciousness-changing creativity that electrified the times and aroused the demand for individual freedom.

In the disquieting ambiguity of the new millennium it's probing how the Beat Generation continued to haunt the American psyche, particularly since in the 1950s Beats seemed to be slightly more than a counter-culture rebellion, a mutinous group of rebels, artists, writers, poets, dropouts and communal explorers who, after World War II, felt disenchanting with the swell of materialism, thus Beat became a condition, a sweeping rebellion that condemned the tedious observance of consumerism.

Allen Ginsberg knew that to be Beat was to not only to be vexed with the humdrum, the commonplace, and the clichéd, but to be exhausted and worn out by failing to live an honest life in a materialistic and technical world. To be Beat was to create new rhythms in the mind - to get beyond the ordinary rush of raw life where it was possible to more than just live. It was this time and society that Allen Ginsberg was the product of. And it is to that end necessary to fathom the deep meaning of Ginsberg's environment and its impact upon his personality and writings. In his search for definitions Ginsberg explored the hollowness of the mighty America; a hollowness that culminated in the dropping of the atom bombs. Ginsberg treaded the path that was laid before him by the very chaotic relationship among his family. He could not help but feel that he was a true son of America and that America was a true whore that sold herself to the highest bidder only to be violated and violate others. His personal trauma became universal as the shared trauma of all the young beatniks and those that opposed the dropping of the atom bomb. In the eyes of Allen Ginsberg, the society he faced was illusionary and de-individualizing, while the state, the workplace, the media, and consumer culture all appeared to stand in queue with the 'square' society of McCarthy's America.

Talking about the crucial post war years and the impact of the second world war on Ginsberg's career, Jonah Raskin, wrote in his book, 'The American Scream', "like many other writers around the world, Ginsberg turned the atom bomb into an all inclusive metaphor. Everywhere he looked he saw apocalypse and atomization. Everything had been blown up. And almost everywhere he looked he saw the Cold War"²(Raskin,2005,xiv) Talking about Ginsberg's disillusionment and disappointment Raskin further says that "the fact that he couldn't read Howl and 'America' on primetime TV infuriated him. 'I still can't go on CBS or NBC and say, 'go fuck yourself with your atom bomb,' he complained. 'America still doesn't understand. America is still trapped.'" (Raskin,2005,xv) It won't be wrong to say that back in the 50's Ginsberg entertained the notion that America was a prison, the land of the unfree. Everything in President Eisenhower's America seemed "to run on a routine of unspiritualized mediocrity" he complained in his journal. "Standardization and mechanization and control of the individual psyche" seemed "a fait accompli" (Raskin,2005,161) The arrival of the television seemed to be the most alarming invention of the modern world, for Ginsberg, it was an era of 'silent conformity' resulting from the war and from the universalization of the television.

Holmes once mentioned that 'Beat' was an American brand of existentialism. The Beat Generation is said to be the 'illegitimate son of the Lost Generation', it was Kerouac who mentioned that the Beats were, "a swinging group of new American men"³ in the late 40's who were "intent on joy" because they survived the second world war and possessed "wild self believing individuality" the Beats were the American counterpart of the lost Generation, though the latter failed to establish the same impact as that of the former. The term 'Lost Generation' was coined by Gertrude Stein shortly after World War I. It is said that she was getting her car repaired by a French garage mechanic who was having troubles with her car. On seeing the predicament of the young French mechanic destroyed by the massacre of the war, the words Lost Generation came to her spontaneously. Similarly for Kerouac the word 'Beat generation' came impulsively after seeing the holocaust of the Second World War.

The post second world war generation has been compared to the other post war generations that label themselves as 'lost'. Unlike the Lost Generation, that lamented the loss of faith, hope, religion and God, the Beats are 'more occupied with the need of it' Voltaire's old joke that "if there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him"⁴ goes well with the Beats. John Clellon Holmes in his essay 'this is the Beat Generation' explains in length the differences between the two post-war generations:

"The lost Generation was discovered in a roadster, laughing hysterically because nothing meant anything more. It migrated to Europe, unsure whether it was

looking for the 'orgiastic future' or escaping from the 'puritanical past'. Its symbols were the flapper, the flask of bootleg whiskey, and an attitude of desperate frivolity best expressed by the line: 'Tennis, anyone?' It was caught up in the romance of disillusionment, until even that became an illusion... But the wild boys of today are not lost. Their flushed, often scoffing, always intent faces elude the world, and it would sound phony to them... Furthermore, the repeated inventory of shattered ideals, and the laments about the mud in moral currents, which so obsessed the Lost Generation, do not concern young people today. They take things frighteningly for granted. They were brought up in these ruins and no longer notice them. They drink to 'come down' or to 'get high', not to illustrate anything. Their excursions into drugs or promiscuity come out of curiosity, not disillusionment"⁵

America gained supreme power and unparalleled prosperity after the World War II under the Presidency of Harry s. Truman and then later Dwight d. Eisenhower. America proceeded towards a newer scale of consumerism and capitalism, a growth which was unseen before, the boom in the economy led to expansion in suburbs, luxuries were turned into necessities and television replaced the radio. John Kenneth Galbraith, a Canadian-American economist has pointed out, that "the success of the [American] economy in the years following World War II was accompanied by [a] deep uneasiness"⁶ that "industry's ideas and Ideals" were engaged in an "unremitting battle against totalitarianism" and that "the people of the United States could 'be led over a bridge of socialism into a police state'

Bogged down by the atrocities of the Second World War the Beats looked to East for spiritual fulfilment. The Western faith had failed them and god in the Post Modern American civilization was dead. There was a sense of moral and spiritual hollowness in the minds of the people and thus they were on the look out of a new faith. Initially the West's interest in the East was determined by negative impulses, the desire to study the Eastern religions was driven by the fanatical craving to convert the Easterners into Christianity. The west saw the east as 'Heathen' and took the responsibility of educating the East and showing them the way of Christ. Whatever knowledge an average American possessed about the Eastern religions was due to Missionary accounts. It was only in the twentieth century that the East could have been said to have any serious and scholarly influence over the American mind. Swami Vivekananda's speech in World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 can be seen as one of the starting points of the West's interest in the East. Winston L. King in his paper entitled, 'Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence' talks about the pioneers who laid the foundation of a serious study in Eastern religions. It was Paul Carus, who for the first time introduced D. T. Suzuki to America and presented his own demythologized version of Buddhism; A. J. Edmunds, did a parallel study of the teachings of the

Buddha and Christ and brought the striking similarities in their teachings to the world, and Dwight Goddard brought out his Buddhist Bible in 1932. These works became the basis of what today can be seen as a downpour of literature about eastern thought and religions. Christianity somehow failed in the post modern American world. The mechanized world and the capitalist environment of the 50's and 60's led millions of Americans in a state of limbo.

At one level, the Beat writers may be seen as early leaders in the post-World War II turn to the East, whose attitudes and use of Asian religious thought provide important insight into the impact of the East on modern American religious beliefs. In the post-World War II period, Beat writers did more than any other literary group to shift America's cultural focus toward the East. The nearly simultaneous publication in 1958 of a special Zen number of the Chicago Review and of Jack Kerouac's novel, 'The Dharma Bums', first alerted the public to Beat interest in Asian thought.

1960's can be seen as the backpackers era, hundreds of young men and women found in Eastern thought and religion an escape from the materialistic life of Capitalist America, a country in distress and anguish due to the Vietnam war was finding peace in the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism. In an interview given to Suranjan Ganguly in 1994, Allen Ginsberg spoke about his experiences and his desire to visit India. Though Ginsberg had travelled to many countries in Europe he found himself lured towards India because of its rich, and 'exquisite' and 'aesthetically attractive culture'. He was sure that India would provide answers to his questions and that it is this country where he will find true peace and spirituality. "By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture."⁷ Says Allen Ginsberg, the poet laureate of America in his interview with Suranjana Ganguly during one of his visits to India. On being asked in an interview "Was there a sense that the West had failed you in certain respects?"⁸ Allen Ginsberg replied, "Well, as I had written six-seven years before in "Howl": "Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen." I had read Spengler's *The Decline of the West* in 1945-46 and was already anticipating the decline of empire which took a long time to happen, but in half a century it was almost gone, almost over. . . . So there was a realization that the West was impermanent, that the entire Western rationalistic, Aristotlean mind was causing chaos, and I was interested in Eastern thought"

By 1962, he had already read the *Bhagavad Gita* and Sri Ramakrishna's *Table Talk*, along with various other Buddhist writings, including the *Tibetan Book of Dead*. He was interested in many a stream of faith he came across in India. From spending innumerable nights with Bohemian post-independent Bengali poet-groups to visiting Hindu burning-ghats and watching dead

bodies being cremated, his diverse experiences also included prolonged interactions with sadhus, yogis and divine practitioners of various cults. Thus Ginsberg's tenure in India offered him a first-hand experience of delving deep into Asian religions that would continue to influence him throughout his life.⁹

While his stay in India, Ginsberg learnt how to play a harmonium and would use the instrument while reciting his poetry. He also learnt some 'mantras' and 'shlokas' in Sanskrit and Hindi during his stay in the holy city of Varanasi. According to his biographers, Ginsberg had learnt a lot many Hindu and Buddhist mantras which he used to recite in his public gatherings. It is said that during the mid 60's Ginsberg made contacts with Shrilal Prabhupada while the latter was visiting America, this meeting resulted in Ginsberg's intensified interest in the 'Hare Krishna' movement of the 60's in India and abroad.

"On talking about this Indian influence, Ginsberg says, "The Indian influence was first of all on the voice itself and on the notion of poetry and music coming together. India helped me to rediscover that relationship between poetry and song. I heard people singing in the streets, chanting mantras, so I began singing mantra too- "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" or "Hare Om Namah Sivaye." "It was at the Magh Mela (Kumbha Mela) at Allahabad," he continues, "that I heard a Nepalese lady singing "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" and the melody was so beautiful that it struck in my head and I took it home to America in 1962 and began singing it at poetry parties, after poetry readings with finger cymbals first and later the harmonium."⁸

Ginsberg found refuge in the spiritual and populated cities of Calcutta and Varanasi, these were the places that made him realize his own self, felt loved and cherished. While on his stay in India, Ginsberg also heavily experimented with drugs. He used marijuana in order to experience God and spirituality. He wanted to discover his own self, to know things more deeply just as a Sadhu would do. Ginsberg travelled extensively and propagated the use of marijuana in different countries, more of a Sadhu in search of the divine presence of God achievable only in a high state. Of all the poets who travelled to East, Ginsberg was the one who was transformed by the journey. It was through his prolonged stay in India and his experiences of staying with Sadhus, yogis and aghories that Ginsberg himself became a 'guru' for the young and rebellious youth of the 60's in the US.

The memory of India lingered with Ginsberg all through his life. A few days before his death in 1997, Ginsberg wrote in his journal for the last time, his final poem, "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgias)". Therein, he recalled some of the happiest moments of his life, which also included his trysts with India. He recalled his bathing at the banks of the holy Ganges, sitting beside Orlovsky at the Manikarnika ghat, and relishing 'Chai with older Sunil & the young coffeehouse poets'.

Ginsberg's main aim in travelling to India was to seek some spiritual answers that the West could not give. He felt that Hinduism could answer all his questions. He believed that 'ganja' could help him in his spiritual quest and just as a Sadhu feels unified with God after smoking weed so could he liberate himself and experience a trance-state in which he could be one with God. Ginsberg never did enjoy drugs so much in life as he did in India. There he could use it freely without inhibitions and without having any guilty feelings about it.

It is evident that the world's biggest economy and super power looked towards the East, especially India and China for spiritual contentment. The 'Bomb' had become an ever fixed slur on the American society that caused enough pain and trauma for generations to follow. Even after more than fifty years of the dropping of the bomb the American society at large feels responsible for the holocaust. However, even though in little form, the East did help the wandering souls of the 50's to have a sense of belongingness and solace.

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