



From Manhattan to Manikarnika: A Study of the ‘Aghori’ Cult and Its Influence on the Life of Allen Ginsberg



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Abstract

My Paper entitled ‘From Manhattan to Manikarnika’ traces down the history of Allen Ginsberg’s stay in India. It aims to draw parallels between the Beat writers of the apocalyptic 60’s in America and the revered ‘Aghori’ sadhus in India. For an average American in the 60’s, the East, especially India was a queer nation, it was this queerness that fascinated the Beats writers of the 1960’s in America. The reverence and reception of nudity, the celebration of the body, the adoration of death, the consumption of hallucinatory drugs for spiritual connection; approval of everything bizarre and gory lured the west to turn to the ‘heathen’ east for spiritual liberation from its constrained, materialistic society. The ‘aghoris’ managed to impress the Beat writers of the west to such an extent that Ginsberg ended up himself being a ‘yogi’ after his visit to India. Apart from Hinduism, in general, the one aspect that I wish to talk about and study in detail is the influence of the higher philosophy on the mindset of Allen Ginsberg.

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1. Introduction

There has been a tendency to portray the Beat movement in a very narrow sense by referring to it as a mere cultural and literary ‘impulse’ and to see this impulse in a negative shade and regard the movement as a mere revolt rather than a protest for something. During its initial struggle to establish itself, Beat literature and movement had to face immense opposition. John Wain called William Burroughs's Naked Lunch “a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust, an effort to keep the reader's nose down in the mud for 250 pages.” (Campbell, James 12), while others (Norman Podhoretz) called Kerouac's On the Road as “poverty of emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic resources, the ineptitude of expression, and an inability to make anything dramatically meaningful.” (Campbell, James 12) It was supposed that they were at war with everything sacred in Eisenhower's America - “Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the

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Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean or peace-provoking H-bomb.” (Tytell, John 32) The Nation dismissed the beats as “naysayers”; even Playboy called them “nihilists.” Some were sympathetic towards them like Lawrence Lipton who called them ‘Holy Barbarians’, “holy in their search of Self and barbarians in their total rejection of the so-called civilized standards of success, morality and neurosis” (Tytell, John 32) while others like William F Brown were callous enough to call them, “a hip collection of cartoons about life and love among Beatniks.” (Tytell, John 32)

The beats howled back to this critical chorus in one voice. “Beat,” Kerouac emphasized that ‘beat’, stood not for “beat down” but for “beatific.” “I want to speak for things,” he explained. “For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for the most divine man who ever lived who was German (Bach) I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha, I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-Tse I speak out.” (Steven Watson, 42) To those who called Howl “howl against civilization,” Ginsberg replied that his ejaculatory work was a protest in the original sense of “pro-attestation, that is testimony in favor of Value.” He illustrated his protest in religious terms. “‘Howl’ is an ‘Affirmation’ by individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity,” (Charters, Ann, 16) he explained. “The poems are religious and I meant them to be.” (Charters, Ann, 16) In their quest for spirituality, some of the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky travelled to East. Allen Ginsberg visited India in the early 60’s and stayed for an extended period of over a year. During his stay, he came in touch with various Bengali poets and was also exposed to various Hindu rites and rituals. His prolonged stay in India influenced him to a great extent and changed the course of his poetry. This paper is an attempt to study the various influences that India had over Allen Ginsberg.

2. Research Method

My paper is a biographical study of the life of Allen Ginsberg and his stay in India. Thus the two major approaches used by me in this research are the Biographical approach and the Historical Approach. I have accessed the archives of the ‘Allen Ginsberg Project’ and the library of ‘Naropa University’ to gain access to various interviews and voice recordings of Ginsberg and his contemporaries. Apart from these, my reference material is mostly from various books written on and by Allen Ginsberg on the subject.

3. Results and Analysis

Kashi, the terrain of the mystic and the shaman, the illuminated city of the sacred, revered temples, the oldest city on planet earth is also, the seat of learning and habitat of the holy men of India: Sadhus. Kashi or Varanasi is a city of paradoxes: it has a sense of nakedness. The very air you breathe here is that of reverence, liberation and spirituality. The religious capital of India has got its name from the two rivers ‘Varuna’ and ‘Assi’ that once surrounded the city and were the two tributaries to the river Ganges. Popular belief says that the city was founded by Lord Shiva, one of the trinity of Hindu Gods and is resting on Lord Shiva’s ‘Trishul’ (trident). Kashi is the abode of Lord Shiva, it is here that the ‘Lingam’ (phallus of Lord Shiva) is worshipped along with the ‘yoni’ (vagina) of Parvati (Shiva’s consort). It is a symbol of energy and potential life. The union of lingam and yoni represents the “indivisible two-in-oneness of male and female, the passive space and active time from which all life originates” (Jansen, Eva, 16)

It is in Kashi that we come across the most reverend aesthetics of India, the sadhus. The very manifestation of a sadhu is queer. Sparsely clothed, unkempt hair, wandering mystic, drugged with ganja and almost always in a state of trans, is all that a Sadhu’s life is. A sadhu is an unconventional, liberated, aesthetic whose singular aspiration in life is to achieve ‘nirvana’ or ‘moksha’ (liberation) from the cycle of life and death. There are two major divisions, or sects, of Sadhus: “Shaiva” Sadhus, who worship Lord Shiva, the God of Destruction (for recreation), and “Vaishnavas”, who are the ascetic disciples of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the Universe. Apart from these two key categories, there are some “Shakta” Sadhus as well, who are the disciples of the goddess ‘Shakti’, also known as ‘Kali’, ‘Tara’ and ‘Parvati’, she is the consort of Lord Shiva and also the goddess of absolute might and supremacy. There are many sub-categories of ‘Shaiva’ sadhus like, the ‘Nagas’ who remain unclothed and the ‘Aghoris’, or the warrior Sadhus.

The word ‘Aghori’ originated from the word ‘Aghora’ which means ‘deeper than deep’ or as ‘gentle’ or ‘filled with light’ or ‘illuminated’. Due to lack of significant and concrete facts, the history and origin of the Aghori still remain obscure. However, it is said that the Aghori sect of sadhus was started by Kina Ram baba in 700 AD. Aghora is the apotheosis of tantra, the Indian religion whose supreme deity is the mother goddess. The external appearance of an Aghori is appalling, they are the most feared sadhus in India, and are known for their

most bizarre rituals and practices. On a regular basis, an aghori can be seen adorning nothing but ashes from the fresh burning pyres of cremation grounds; they are often seen carrying a human skull (used as a begging bowl, and the only utensil) and are notorious for legal cannibalism and necrophilia in India. Aghoris worship the violent form of lord Shiva, also called the 'Mahakala', or its female manifestation; Shakti or Kali, the goddess of death. The aghoris embrace everything that society discards as uncouth and coarse, they believe in accommodating the most bizarre and shocking rituals. Thus devouring everything from nudity, to smearing their bodies with fresh human ash from the cremation grounds, drinking bhang, liquor and eating human flesh of the deceased and dead, to worshipping dead bodies, 'shav pooja' having sex with dead remains of women from the burning ghats (pyres) and consuming their own faeces and urine are the customary aspects of an aghori lifestyle.

It is this queerness in Hinduism that fascinated the Beats so much. The reverence and reception of nudity, the celebration of the body, the adoration of death, the consumption of hallucinatory drugs for spiritual connection; approval of everything bizarre and gory lured the west to turn to the 'heathen' east for spiritual liberation from its constrained, materialistic society. Tantra and aghoris, in particular, have been discussed and studied in the west on a very biased note. Their perceptions have been generalized by relating them to sexual practices only when sex is merely a part of the 'tantra' sadhna. The aghoris managed to impress the Beat writers of the west to such an extent that Ginsberg ended up himself being a 'yogi' after his visit to India. During his extended stay in Calcutta, Ginsberg was asked in an interview what lured him to India. He had replied saying "A more intimate awareness of the relation between people and God. Just the very notion of Ganesh with a noose in one hand and a rasgoolla in the other, and his trunk in the rasgoolla, riding a mouse... Such an idea of a god, such a sophisticated, quixotic, paradoxical combination of the human and the divine, the metaphysical and the psychological! You don't often get that in Christianity...And then just the notion of somebody being a businessman and then renouncing the world and being a sannyasi and going around with an intelligent expression looking for moksha"(Ganguly, Suranjana). It was this "enormous tolerance in India for every possible form of eccentric behavior and religious excess that made Allen feel that most of his friends in North Beach and the Lower East Side would be better off here" says Barry Miles in Allen Ginsberg's biography.

It will not be ambitious to say that Ginsberg was already a 'yogi' before he came to India, he had read the Bhagwad Geeta (The song of God) and Ramakrishna's 'Table-talk' the Tibetan book of death. He had even read a little of the Mahabharata (The biggest Epic in the world) and had some knowledge of the Vedas and the Upanishads. He 'saw himself as a saint' (Charters, Ann, 16). The real reason for which he came to India was to find himself a spiritual 'guru' (teacher) whom he could love and revere. One night in Rishikesh, 'the gateway to heaven', (Charters, Ann, 45) Ginsberg asked Swami Shivananda, where he could find his guru to which Swami Shivananda replied, "The only guru is your own heart. You will know him when you see him because you will love him" (Barker, 110). Born into a Jewish family Ginsberg by his very birth was a complex prodigy of madness and spirituality. He was brought up very differently. His lunatic mother who is an inmate in Bloomingdale and Greystone asylum for most of his childhood years, Ginsberg was brought up by his strict father Louis. As a child, he was always fascinated by alternative beliefs and philosophies. It was in an 'ashram' on the banks of the holy Ganges, that Ginsberg was for first time introduced to the holy chants of 'Hare Rama, Hare Krishna' It was in the ashram of Swami Shivnanda, where Ginsberg had his first experience with Hinduism, he was amongst the first who popularized the holy chant 'Hare Rama, Hare Krishna' by making use of it in his public poetry readings in America throughout the 60's. After finishing eleven weeks in India, Allen wrote to Kerouac saying "the subjective result on me of India has thus been to start dropping all spiritual activity initiated since Blake voice days and all mental activities I can discard, and stop straining at heavens door and all that mysticism and drugs and cut-ups and gurus and fears of hells and desires of God and as such, as a result, in sum, I feel better and more relaxed and don't give a shit..."(Miles, Barry, 304)

Apart from Hinduism, in general, the one aspect that I wish to talk about and study in detail is the influence of the aghor philosophy on the mindset of Allen Ginsberg. It is pertinent to say that Ginsberg who spent most of his time in Kashi (Varanasi) spent a lot of time with the wandering naga sadhus and aghoris who so frequently visited the cremation ghats of Varanasi, especially the 'Manikarnika'. (Indian Journals, 151) At the Manikarnika, Ginsberg met Shambu Bharti Baba, the silent naga sadhu, and thereon began a new chapter of aestheticism in Ginsberg's life. Through baba Shambhu Bharti, Ginsberg met several other naga sadhus and aghoris who adorned the ghats of benaras, and it is here on that his metamorphosis started.

Unlike the west which believes in repressing death, the one essential and key philosophy of the aghoris is the 'celebration of death'. The west has constantly suppressed death, as it is associated with anxiety and suffering.

People make deliberate efforts to avoid engaging the emotions and realities surrounding death such as focusing on looking younger. Yet avoiding the emotional content that often arises around the topic of death creates an inauthentic way of being, a sort of repression. (Suri, Rochelle, 1) It is for this reason that body embalming is so widespread in many Christian communities in the west the idea is to see the deceased person in their alive form, another form of rejection of death. In Hinduism on the contrary death is seen as transient. It is also essential to understand death in Judaism, the religion that Ginsberg was brought up into, In Judaism the public display of the dead body is prohibited. In Jewish burials the body of the deceased is never displayed, in fact, open casket ceremonies are completely prohibited by Jewish law. According to Jewish law, exposing a body is considered disrespectful. In Hinduism, the cremation is open for all to view, except for women, as they are banned from the cremation grounds. The Aghoris idea of death is pretty remarkable, they acknowledge and revere death, as without the knowledge and recognition of death life is meaningless. The Aghori's human skull, reminds him of the transient nature of life and keeps him close to the idea of death. They believe that the normal world is an illusion, 'Maya', and that death is the ultimate reality. According to Svaboda (1986), the funeral pyre is the ultimate reality: a continual reminder that everyone has to die. Death is personified and even deified. Aghoris are not concerned with physical death, but yearn for the annihilation of the limitations of their physical being. There is no fear of death because everything we possess and wish to possess is impermanent. Death is in reality the release from the physical shackles, which the Aghoris break free of when they embrace or adopt death as the only medium of transcendence. The entire world is a samshar for the Aghori because every single individual is born to die. The rituals that aghoris practice are bizarre and very peculiar: they symbolize the 'non-dualistic beliefs' of an aghori. It is said that the corpse upon which the Aghori meditates is a symbol of his own body and the corpse devouring ritual is a symbol of the transcendence of his lower self and a realization of the greater, all-pervading Self. Cannibalism is also closely associated with Aghori rituals. Eating human flesh is yet another reminder to the Aghori that there exists no distinction between good or bad, human or animal flesh. Such distinctions are only delusive, and seldom serve any purpose in the spiritual development of the human soul. (Suri, Rochelle,2)

If there has been a poet of any considerable importance who was consumed by his mother's madness and death and whose psychosis shaped the course of his writing, it was Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg's 'Kaddish' (a cry on his mother's painful demise) resonates his mother's madness and insanity. It painfully details the description of his mother's journey into insanity and physical decay and eventual death, and also presents an unsentimental and non-romantic account of madness and the effects thereof on Ginsberg personally and his family as a whole. Allen was so devastated by his mother's death that he did not even go for the funeral of his own mother. He did not want to accept the fact that she was gone. After a few days of Naomi's death Ginsberg wrote "everything changes towards death. My mother. Myself...My childhood is gone with my mother. My memory becomes less clear. My body will go. There is no me left. Naomi is a memory." (Miles, Barry 313) Allen Ginsberg was very anxious about death. Visiting the burning ghats in Nimtallah and Manikarnika, he sat in the company of these aesthetes and meditated on the transient nature of life and the certainty of death. He once told Gregory that seeing cremations in the open "ended a lot of my anxiety about dying, especially always getting high with naked holy men in burning ghats, watching the roast" (Miles, Barry, 313). Referring to cremation grounds in Manikarnika, Ginsberg says that it was the 'best show here' (Miles, Barry, 312) In his journal dated October 20th 1962 Ginsberg writes, "Many corpses in the noon time flame, one with head burnt black down to the skull & teeth showing & eyes popped & white -Golgotha resting in place at the head of the woodpile-later, another face all exploded & dripping with fat-later passed by it & the skull had opened, the facebone mask all black slid down where the neck would have been, among charred & burning woodchips-but the brain suddenly revealed-not yet burnt...looked majestic". (Indian Journals, 78) It is here in these very lines we see how Ginsberg, a shy young man, consumed by the death and insanity of his mother is finally able to get rid of the fear associated with death. Here he is an 'aghoris' who is partaking of the ceremonial rituals involved in cremation, smoking ganja and hallucinating about God and death while meditating on the burning ghats of Manikarnika. It was there he felt liberated from the fear of death and embraced it with open arms.

Ginsberg's connection with the aghoris and their strange bizarre ways of celebrating death had an extremely grave impact on the psyche of Ginsberg, he seemed to have accepted the reality of life. His 'Father Death Blues' written on the demise of his father is a philosophical reflection on life and death. Unlike Kaddish where Ginsberg mourns the death of his mother, in Father Death Blues, we find him as a spiritual guru who has reconciled with death. The famous lines of Father Death Blues are :

Buddha Death, I wake with you
 Dharma Death, your mind is new
 Sangha Death, we'll work it through

Suffering is what was born
 Ignorance made me forlorn
 Tearful truths I cannot scorn

It is therefore imperative to appreciate how Ginsberg's stay in India transformed him into a yogi. We find in him a sense of acceptance for death. He agrees that suffering is something we were born to experience and it is only through suffering, penance and hurt that we can achieve the ultimate nirvana in life. The dead body no longer held fear and anxiety in his heart, on the contrary he says "Father Death, Don't cry anymore, Mama's there, underneath the floor, Brother Death, please mind the store" he seems to have grown over the phase of separation, and though Louis was a very influential man in his life and Ginsberg seems to have lost a part of him with his passing away, he wrote to Gregory "I'm finished as a poet, no more magic, nobody left out there to yell at, nobody left to curse out, to take revenge or feel superior to!" (Indian Journals, 114) Despite all his loss, it can be said that Ginsberg traveled the path of 'ghora' (darkness) and ultimately emerged as 'aghora' (light) Ginsberg finally reveals his new found self in his Indian Journals. In an interview he spoke openly about how his ideas about death were transformed from fear to acceptance in India, talking about his experiences in the burning ghats he says, "I went there time a week and stayed there very late at night. For one thing, I was amazed at the openness of death, the visibility of death which is hidden and powdered and rouged and buried in a coffin in the West. To suggest the opposite, the openness of it is like an education which is totally different from the cultivation of the notion of the corpse as still relevant and alive and "doesn't kick it over". There they just lay it out and burn it and the family watches the dissolution, they see the emptiness in front of them, the emptiness of the body in front of them. So I had the opportunity to see the inside of the human body, to see the face cracked and torn, fallen off, the brains bubbling and burning. And reading Ramakrishna at the time - the dead body is nothing but an old pillow, an empty pillow, like burning an old pillow. Nothing to be afraid of. So it removed a lot of the fear of the corpse that we have in the West. And then I saw people singing outside on Thursday nights and other nights too. That was amazing, and the noise was rousing, very loud, and I would sit around, pay attention and listen, and try and get the words" (Ganguly, Suranjan)

The Aghori sect is an offshoot of the Kapalika order (devotees of the skull carrying 'Rudra' form of Lord Shiva) The 'Rudra' form of Lord Shiva is very daunting for the western eye. Rudra appears with squirms of unruly hair, tied in the form of a bun on the head, a crescent moon strategically placed on the forehead, a third eye, snakes around the neck, body smeared with human ash, meditating on a corpse, which is a symbol of his own body. This Rudra form of Lord Shiva is worshipped by his disciples as well. Aghoris maintain that nothing in this illusionary world is good or bad and that there is no dissimilarity between pure and impure, everything must be celebrated as everything is a part of the universal whole which is the supreme God. The principal reason behind the embracing of toxic and waste is actually a realization of non-duality. By transcending social taboos and customs, an aghori sees the illusionary nature of life. An Aghori is said to have completed his 'sadhna' (training) only when he is able to acquire a human skull, which is an essential and exclusive property that an aghori can possess. A corpse sometimes is also used for a strange Aghori ritual called 'shav sadhana' where these sadhus sit and meditate over the corpse in order to achieve complete control of the dead body. Some aghoris are also known for practicing necrophilia, where the sadhus make love to dead female bodies. Here we find a bizarre celebration of the body, even dead, half burnt, rotting human flesh is adorned and celebrated. (documented)

It is in this filth and its strange adoration that Aghoris seems to influence the Beats, especially Allen Ginsberg. When Ginsberg wrote 'Howl' he had no idea how closely his concept of 'holy' would resonate with the 'holy' of these 'wandering holy men of India'. Ginsberg belonged to a conformist Jewish family, he belonged to an era of restraint, confinement and social control. Being a homosexual in the 50's in America was not an easy task. When Ginsberg's seminal poem 'Howl' came out, it raised many eyebrows and was charged with obscenity and was taken for trial by those who called 'Howl' a revolt against civilization. Ginsberg replied at his critics that Howl, his ejaculatory poem was a protest in religious terms. "'Howl' is an 'Affirmation' of the individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity," he explained. "The poems are religious and I meant them to be" (Miles, Barry, 72). The Footnote to Howl is one the most beautiful pieces of poetry written by Ginsberg. It is in his

Footnote that Ginsberg hails everything as holy. He disregards the social ideology of appropriateness and starts a new order where everything is celebrated and worshipped. He goes on to the extent of saying ‘The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The / tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!’ Here human organs are revered and worshiped, the cock and the asshole are holy too, ‘The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are / holy!’ Thus Ginsberg here exemplifies an aghori sitting and meditating in the shaman. (cremation ground) An aghori, for whom holiness is not only in temples and ashrams but even in flesh and filth. The last lines of the Footnote to Howl places Ginsberg in the same pedestal as that of a sanyasi aghori: the footnote concludes with ‘Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! holy! ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!’ In the end, all that is essential is magnanimity.

Breaking all codes of sexual taboos, aghoris are seen as the most shocking human beings on this planet. Even in the most heathen of societies necrophilia is prohibited. The aghoris, however, are constantly seen breaking such shackles and constraints of civilized society. The aghoris not only worship ‘Rudra’ or ‘Mahakal’ avatar of Lord Shiva but also his female form, ‘Kali’ or the Goddess of destruction. Like Benaras is the center for Shiv pooja Calcutta is the hub of Kali pooja. Ginsberg stayed for an extended period of time in Calcutta with his Bengali Poet friends, and there, in Nimtallah ghat in Calcutta that he was exposed to Kali pooja. In an interview with Davor Rostuhar, Meronath, an aghori in Benaras says, “The reason why we do things that seem outrageous to the outside world is actually simple. To find purity in the filthiest! If an Aghori manages to remain focused on God even during sex with a corpse or while eating a human brain, then he is on the right way... to remain straight in the head after performing the greatest perversions. Thus we can speed up our spiritual development. If an Aghori manages to remain focused on God even during sex with a corpse or while eating a human brain, then he is on the right way. Unfortunately, there are very few real Aghoris. With time, most of them go crazy.” (Davor, <http://www.davorrostuhar.com/eng/agori.html>)

Aghoris do not follow any restraints when it comes to sexual intercourse; either multiple partners are allowed and prostitutes are used for sexual gratification. Jonathan P. Parry, in his book ‘Death in Banaras’ exposes these uncanny rituals of aghoris. As already mentioned, the Lingam and the Yoni are worshipped in Benares. They are the manifestation of progeny and life. Both Shiv and Shakti (kali) are worshipped together to celebrate their union. To impress Kali, the aghoris perform the ‘chakra puja’ the chakra pooja involves ‘panchmakara’ meaning the five M’s, these five M’s are: ‘mans’ (meat) ‘macchli’ (fish), ‘madya’ (liquor) ‘mudra’ (parched grain, or kidney bean) and ‘maithun’ (sexual intercourse) In Chakra pooja a woman (preferably a prostitute) is made to sit in the centre where she is worshipped as ‘kali’ she is offered food and drinks which are also shared by the other aghoris who sit circling her, Parry says that “The first four M’s all possess aphrodisiac qualities and thus leads towards the fifth in which the adept and his partner incarnate shiva and his consort united in coitus reservatus” (Parry, Jonathan, 256) It is preferred that the woman is a prostitute or from a lower caste and is menstruating. It is said that “the bed of the prostitute is equivalent to a cremation ground in that it is an equally proper place for an aghori to perform his ‘sadhna’” (Parry, 256)

The beats were sexual rebels of the 50’s, they followed no restrictions in matters of sexual preferences and were seen as outlaws, they were self-declared homosexuals, and believed in shocking the society by the explicit sexual frankness in their works. Ginsberg was deeply in love with Neal Cassady, in fact Neal became his obsession. He hails Neal in ‘Howl’ calling him a ‘saintly motorcyclist’ Ginsberg started reading books on the subject of ‘sex’, both fiction and nonfiction, Clifford Howards’s idea of ‘phallus’ being the embodiment of creative power interested him the most and he formed his own mythology of phallus being the fountain of all creativity. Jonah Ruskin, the writer of ‘American Scream’ gives us an account of Ginsberg’s sexuality and his fascination for sex “Sex and sexuality became the subtext of his fiction and poetry; almost all his symbols were sexual symbols, he explained to Kerouac. At eighteen Ginsberg fell in love with Kerouac and wrote love poems and love stories about him.” (Raskin, 125) after his return from India, once Ginsberg he spoke with his first biographer, Jane Kramer, that he longed for “the simple, private pleasures of a homey ‘hindu kirtan’ or a sacred orgy among friends” (Marler, xxxiii) Regna Marler in her book ‘How the Beats turned America onto sex’ further emphasizes upon the sexual inhibitions of the early 50’s in the US, she mentions that “Mad behaviour was essential to the Beats, their first answer to the conformist ethos of 1940’s and 1950’s. They cultivated –and applauded– a lack of inhibition: sex at a moment’s notice, with a hustler or a friend or a friend’s lover; sudden arrivals and departures; big arguments and reconciliation.” (Marler, 3) The sexual orientation of the Beats was as outrageous in the 50’s as those of Aghoris in India. Both the communities are known for their experimental and avant-garde ideas related to sexuality.

Nudity is another aspect common to both the Beats and Aghoris, nudity in sadhus is something that is revered and respected. A Naga sadhu remains unclothed throughout his life, while some Aghoris also follow the same practice, though in most cases the torso is covered by a small loincloth. Nudity in Hinduism is practiced only by these two major sadhu sects, they are of the belief that nudity is a metaphor of purity, clothes are seen as a symbol of materialist lifestyle and thus in order to achieve salvation or 'nirvana' one has to get rid of social manifestation. An aghori denounces society and its square norms. Baldeo Upadhyay observes that "the Indian culture is based upon the three T's – Tyag (renunciation), Tapasya (penance) and Tapovan (hermitage)", thus if one has to attain truth or the highest form of knowledge, an individual must observe 'tyag' or unrelenting sacrament and indifference from worldly vows. While in India Ginsberg found this form of acceptance of nudity exceedingly remarkable, he talks in detail about aghoris and their peculiar practices in his journals. In his journal entry dated 18th December, Ginsberg mentions that during one of his aimless wanderings at the ghats of Benaras he spotted 'Shambhu Bharti Baba' who "got to his feet, stripped off his g-string & pulled down his cock under between his legs-one yogic ball bumping out-like cunt-for a photo-I took a dozen, all the group smoking round the pot & ashes-one standing of the Naga sadhu with his pots & brass tridents etc." (Indian Journals, 130) This acceptance of nudity that Ginsberg had in India, did not exist while young Allen was growing up. Ginsberg grew up under the shadow of her psychotic mother who was severely schizophrenic and was under constant supervision and medication, his mother's madness grew up on him to such an extent that Ginsberg himself was in rehabilitation for a while. Barry Miles, Ginsberg's biographer explores in detail the relationship with Allen and his mother, he mentions that Naomi was not only paranoid but she was constantly a bother for the whole family, she would move around naked in the house in front of his own children, and this was quite disturbing for the young mind of Allen Ginsberg. In his Biography Miles writes "another cause of unrest in the Ginsberg home was Naomi's nudism. Louis upbraided his wife for parading naked in front of the boys, while he respected her belief in naturalism...to Ginsberg, in retrospect, her nudism was more neurotic exhibitionism than a genuine belief in naturalism." (Miles, 16) However as time passed Ginsberg used nudity as a form of rebellion against the square society of his times, Ginsberg once stripped off his clothes in public at a Los Angeles Poetry reading in 1957. While in India, nudity was something which was not very uncommon, men in India would move around in public without an upper garment and just in striped boxer shorts, something that would sound outrageous to a western ear. In his Interview about his stay in India, Ginsberg spoke about how Indian customs and practices were so simple, acceptable and unfussy like that of the Americans, he says, "That was a revelation: how deeply the sense of a spiritual existence could penetrate everyday relations, the streets, and street signs . . . Naga sadhus walking around naked—people who would have been arrested in America . . . or for that matter—I remember writing to Kerouac—everybody walking around in their underwear, in striped boxer shorts. What would seem outrageous or strange to Americans was just normal—it was hot and people wore very light cotton—it seemed so obvious. That showed me the absurd artificiality of some American customs. . . ." (Ganguly, Suranjana)

Another aspect of Beat sensibility and Aghori ritual practices the use of ganja for hallucinatory purposes. The use of the hemp plant in the worship of Lord Shiva is a very known fact in Hinduism. Out of the 1008 names of Lord Shiva, one is called 'Nilakantha' meaning , the God with the blue throat, the reason why Lord Shiva is called Nilakantha is because he drank the 'halahal vish' (poison) that came out when the Gods and Demons churned the ocean in search of 'amrit' (elixir). It is since then that Shiva is worshipped with all kinds of toxic things including, liquor, ganja, cannabis, and hemp. Thus the use of drugs like ganja and cannabis is very common in the ritual practices of Shaiva sadhus. The most outstanding aspect of the Shaiva sadhus and Aghoris, in particular, is their excessive and unrestrained use of ganja and cannabis. These drugs are said to be dear to Lord Shiva and thus are used not only for rituals but also for personal consumption. An aghori believes that consumption of such hallucinatory drugs draws one closer to divinity, it is only for this reason that an aghori is almost always in a trance-like a state. Not only is ganja substantially used by the holy men of India, it is also legalized in India, making India one of the few countries where the use of marijuana is legal. According to religious beliefs, it is said that bhang (a drink made out of cannabis) and ganja are capable of cleansing one's soul of all forms of sin. In my paper entitled 'From Ganja to God: Ginsberg, the quintessential sadhu' I did an elaborate study on the common usage of drugs by both aghoris and Beats, quoting from my earlier paper I would like to say that "On one level, the Beat writers may be seen as early leaders in the war era who turned 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 ways in which the Beats utilized and distorted Asian

conceptions reveal both the rewards and dangers of turning to non-European sources. Thus, the Beats can be seen as the precursors to 'Indian God Men' who later allured the West into the romance of India and its spiritual offerings. Marijuana has long been used as a spiritual tool and mood enhancer, and it is also said that a person taking marijuana has a heightened emotional experience. The Sadhu's intake of 'ganja' or 'charas' brings them into a state where they feel one with God. The spiritual impact of psychedelic drugs depends entirely upon the person using them, it depends on his/her mental state and his/her intentions in using it. While Sadhus on one hand use drugs to experience the divine presence of God around them, on the other the Beats used them to run away from society into the world of ecstasy and bliss. Sadhus who embrace marijuana as a sacrament find it spiritually beneficial, as they feel that the intake of the drug purifies their soul; marijuana helps them focusing their attention inward, toward the realm of spirit and towards God." (Mishra, Geetanjali) Allen Ginsberg in "The Great Marijuana Hoax" talks about his experiences with "ganja" during his stay in India: "In sound good health I smoked legal ganja (as marijuana is termed in India, where it is traditionally used in preference to alcohol), bought from government tax shops in Calcutta, in a circle of devotees, yogis, and hymn-singing pious Shaivite worshipers in the burning ground at Nimtallah Ghat in Calcutta, where it was the custom of these respected gentlemen to meet on Tuesday and Saturday nights, smoke before an improvised altar of blossoms, sacramental milk-candy and perhaps a fire taken from the burning wooden bed on which lay a newly dead body, of some friend perhaps, likely a stranger if a corpse is a stranger, pass out the candy as God's gift to friend and stranger, and sing holy songs all night, with great strength and emotion, addressed to different images of the Divine Spirit. Ganja was there considered a beginning of sadhana (Yogic path or discipline) by some..." (Ginsberg, Allen)

4. Conclusion

There is a considerable amount of in-depth study that could be done on these few parallels between the Beats and the Aghoris. It is, however, strange how two very different communities, different in time and space, different in culture and language could have such striking similarities. It will not be ambitious of me to say that Ginsberg was himself a quintessential Sadhu, there seems to be a very major connection that he had with India. On his return to the US Ginsberg retained a lot of India with him, he would carry a harmonium everywhere he would give poetry reading performances, sometimes they would be followed by bhajan or kirtans as well. On being asked what India gave him the most, Ginsberg replied "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" he further says "But it was at the Magh Mela at Allahabad that I heard a Nepalese lady singing "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" and the melody was so beautiful that it stuck in my head, and I took it home to America in 1963 and began singing it at poetry parties, after poetry readings with finger cymbals first and later the harmonium. And that began to develop into singing and chanting as part of my poetry readings and led to a deepening of my voice, which slowly began to fill up my body and resonate in the breast area (you might say by hyperbole, "heart chakra"), so that I could talk from there, and that reminded me of the voice of Blake that I had heard, as if my youthful apprehension of that voice was a latent resonance of my mature voice..." (Ganguly, Suranjana) Allen Ginsberg today is one of the major poets that America ever gave birth too, but India definitely must have been a part of him in some other life that he comes so close to being an aesthetic himself.

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