Allen Ginsberg arrived at the docks of Bombay\(^1\) in February 1962 with one dollar in his pocket, enough for a taxi ride to American Express where he hoped to find royalties waiting for him, excited finally to be in ‘the promised land’ that he had dreamt of while in Israel four months earlier.\(^2\) This ‘Premonition Dream’ becomes the first entry in the Indian Journals, introduced by Ginsberg on the back cover as ‘self keeping record of self’s consciousness, the old yoga of Poesy’; a stylised embodiment of one country’s spiritual longing for and obsession with another, or certainly of the lure between cultures. It was Ginsberg’s first visit to India. He was nearly 37 years of age and, having always wanted to live to be 74, saw himself at the meridian of his life (26). A few days later, in his morphine-induced state, he was ‘more sure of its mortalism ... all I’ve seen is my life go by, swift as a mosquito with climatic buzzings of aestheticism & self-congratulatory Rhapsody & morphia inactions & musings furthermore’ (9). Much hinged on this journey through India, the spiritual and poetic regeneration that was vital for a poet-priest.\(^3\)

In many ways, the journey started in the summer of 1948 when Ginsberg was living in Harlem. Masturbating, reading a Blake poem, climaxing, then hearing the poem in the voice of Blake, Ginsberg looked out of his window at an ancient sky, at the moment that he had been born for, at an exquisite moment of initiation, when existence itself was God.\(^4\) He had never stopped looking for an explanation since, even when the visions were followed by a stay at a psychiatric institute, the constant travels, the writing of Howl, the notoriety and literary recognition, the death of his mother, and this constant worry of reaching the end before the ultimate realisation: ‘14 years later I’m still being murdered by “God”. Om Mane Padme hum’ (26). India was another key to fit into that lock, to see if it opened any answers to him.

Ginsberg was accompanied by his companion Peter Orlovsky and soon joined by poets Gary Snyder and Joanna Kyger. They all kept journals during this period. Ginsberg’s Indian Journals, Snyder’s Passage through India and Kyger’s Strange Big Moon are radically different from each other, pushing the boundaries of the genre of travel writing. The poets visited as many places as they could, consulting guidebooks, visiting Hindu and Buddhist holy men and religious groups, staying in inexpensive rest houses and retreats set aside for pilgrims. The moving was fairly relentless, and would be gruelling even for natives who didn’t have to deal with the cultural and physical adjustment that the trip demanded from the Americans. They were the ubiquitous homo viator, a fascinating combination of pilgrim and tourist, described by Swatos and Tomasi as ‘a figure who features in all cultures and civilizations ... constantly on a journey in search of what was the supernatural in the past

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\(^1\) The city was renamed Mumbai in 1996.


\(^3\) In his 1957 poem ‘Death to Van Gogh’s Ear’, Ginsberg wrote, ‘Poet is Priest / Money has reckoned the soul of America.’

\(^4\) ‘ancient sky’, ‘initiation’, ‘existence was God’ were phrases that Ginsberg used to describe the experience during his interview with Thomas Clark for The Paris Review (25-8).


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and is now the cultural-exotic, but also the sacred.\textsuperscript{5} For Ginsberg, Orlovsky, Synder and Kyger, the quest was infused with spiritual and intellectual curiosity, an assertion of individuality that involved questioning social identity, where ‘there is no contradiction between piety and relaxation.’\textsuperscript{6} And it was significant that this intensely personal investigation into individualism was taking place within the framework of India’s diverse religious culture.

The present essay’s exploration of India in Beat imagination is based on this projection of the country as a spiritual quest as well a tourist destination, triggering a new era in the dynamics between the two nations, an inquiry propelled by the Beat poets that was different from previous encounters (with American missionaries, philosophers, writers and politicians) as well as a continuum, of interest not only for the richness of thought and aesthetics produced, but for its transformation into ‘the passion of the 1960s counterculture for Indian clothes and music and pop versions of Indian religion.’\textsuperscript{7} India also became the testing ground for many of the core beliefs espoused by the Beats: spiritual experimentation, creativity on the wings of intoxication, celebrating sexuality, and living among the marginalised and the socially disenfranchised. Ginsberg explains,

the Beat Generation and the spiritual liberation movement were just sort of riding on the great biological wave of change in human society and awareness, as the population expanded and the globe grew electric.\textsuperscript{8}

There are three interwoven motifs that can be drawn from Indian Journals in understanding Ginsberg’s persona as a participant in this social movement in the United States and as a spiritual tourist in India: encounter with these ancient religions in their milieu of origin, experience of sex as religion, and religious experiences through drugs. Tangential to these are the obsession with mortality and the identification with those that regular tourists kept a distance from: the squalid, the impoverished, the deformed. Here, in distinction with earlier Western project of ‘saving’ India from its squalor through the ‘miracle’ of development and science, Ginsberg attempts to pay more attention to Indian poverty without simply condemning it. The profound, ambivalent experience of this squalor is examined at length in Ginsberg’s diary jottings and gives this journey of the poets its mythic overtones.

‘Keeping a journal,’ as Kyger puts it, ‘gives history back to you.’\textsuperscript{9} If we are to agree with her and with James L. Farrell that ‘one of the most important developments of the American 1960s was the understanding that the personal is political,’\textsuperscript{10} we can read the Indian Journals as not only symptomatic and heraldic of that understanding of Beat poetry as personalistic, but also as performative, an exhibition in itself. In doing so, one is only too

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{5}William H. Swatos and Luigi Tomasi, \textit{From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety} (Westport: Praeger, 2002) 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{6}Swatos and Tomasi 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{7}Andrew J. Rotter, \textit{Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 34.
\end{itemize}

aware that Ginsberg’s exoticisation and stereotyping of the ‘Orient’, postulating it as a conduit for the realisation of his genius, lends itself to criticism of extending the ‘Orientalism’ projects of European colonisers. A key ambition of the present essay is to find an alternative to the extremely restrictive notion of ‘orientalism’, or indeed ‘appropriation’. How can one prove that any writing by any western writer on India, of any historical period, is not orientalist or appropriative? Ginsberg, a gay Jewish male, is hardly a representative of Empire in the way a philologist-bureaucrat in nineteenth-century colonial India might have been. Indeed, Ginsberg’s writings constantly point to the effort of learning from Indian experiences, even while being critical of them when required. I wish to read this text in a more hospitable and open-ended manner. As with most performativistic texts, the nuances are far more layered, and it is the intention of this essay to take an alternate approach to the postcolonial critique in order to place these ideas in the context of Ginsberg’s poetics and Beat culture. It also seeks to redress the underplaying or overlooking of the Indian Journals in Ginsberg’s oeuvre and to the spiritual saga of the Beat writers.

Indian Journals is a hypnotic work that unites premeditation, a location-specific spontaneity, and a post-deliberative quality. That it seems to encompass all these divergent motifs without the seams showing, even in re-readings, is a testament to its uniqueness. Although Ginsberg claims on the back cover of the book that it was ‘not originated for public eye’, it is clear that the decision to give it a certain form for public consumption was made with an eye on posterity and awareness of the importance of such a work in representing a unique moment in the shared cultural experiences of the United States of America and India.

India Imagined and Experienced
Beginning with the confusion over the identification of ‘Indians’ by Columbus, India, distant and alluring, has always had a place in the American imagination. Whether among early Christian missionaries, the intense poetry of Walt Whitman (especially in ‘Passage to India’), the gentle exploration of the metaphysical by the transcendentalists, or the modernist innovations of T.S. Eliot that invoked the East (most emblematically in ‘The Wasteland’), the fascination decidedly intensified after the Second World War when the United States found itself as a leading defender of the Western ideals of democracy and India gained independence from the British. Americans looked towards India for the same reason that they had valued and ‘needed’ Europe – tradition; only there was the added incentive of the thrill of exploring something unfamiliar, an ancient civilisation that was perceived to be grounded in spirituality and the Atman (soul) in contrast to the American ideals of individuality and capitalism.

Many American philosophers and writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century made the journey to India, either physically like Mark Twain, or intellectually like Emerson, Whitman and George Santayana, or both in person and in writing as did Aldous Huxley. 11 India had something that their American realities did not encompass, ‘something they needed in order to achieve personal fulfillment’. 12 The resurgence of capitalism in America following the Second World War with its ‘all-consuming work ethic, sexual

11 Although Huxley was British, he spent much of his life in the US and had a large influence on American counterculture.
12 Rotter 36.
repression, cultural xenophobia, militaristic patriotism, and suburban materialism brought the accompanying realisation of spiritual bankruptcy. A growing interest in alternative states of consciousness became one way to subvert the increasing materialism underpinning the national creed. Huxley was one of the enthusiastic advocates of induced states of intoxication for mystical experiences. India was perceived as offering easy access to drugs and alcohol, as well as spiritual rediscovery and rejuvenation for those who had given up all worldly possessions, much of which was manifested in the anti-establishment emergence of the Beat philosophy.

Allen Ginsberg explained the concept of Beat, even while resisting the term as a box that tries to include all which is outside the box, calling it ‘a common insight – as well as the correlative of opening up of an awareness or consciousness’ and claiming this common insight to be ‘spiritual liberation.’ This stance would offer wide-ranging implications to the counterculture movement, India becoming a potential source of creative and spiritual inspiration. Stephen Prothero argues that since Beats were spiritual protesters as well as literary innovators, they ought to be viewed as at least minor characters in the drama of American religion. In many ways, the literary and religious experimentations were seen as complementary to each other.

This journey to India, the birthplace of the Buddha, was primarily the idea of Gary Snyder who had been living in Japan and studying Buddhism. He and his wife Joanne Kyger stayed in India between early January and late April 1962; four intense months of travel through the length of the country, from Madurai in the South to Dharamshala in the North, from Calcutta in the East to Jaipur in the West, with a dozen places of tourist interest thrown in between. Ginsberg and Orlovsky joined the couple a month into their travels but stayed on in India for over a year till May 1963.

For those travelling on the American dollar, India was a relatively inexpensive destination and the visitors try to make the most of it. ‘I am everywhere / there is to see as a tourist,’ writes Ginsberg in the Indian Journals (24). It is undeniable that there is often a blindness to the privileges of a strong dollar, and an American passport. Nevertheless, the engagement with the sensorium of India enlarges, and makes visible, the ambiguities of the term ‘tourism’. The supposedly timeless rhetoric of ‘poets on a pilgrimage’ is in truth full of attention to the historical significance of young American poets in a Cold War era, and is fully aware of what this trip would contribute to a newly emerging American counter-cultural sensibility.

Joanna Kyger, whose first book of poems was not yet published, was attempting ‘to investigate the stuff of writing,’ but she was ‘Gary’s wife’ for the journey, and her artistic self can be found crouching resentfully in the pages of her journal, which she dismisses as ‘not very revealing as to the actual experiences of a journey.’ Her entries, because of their preoccupations with laundry and logistics, are bursting with pent-up creative energies; her observations sharp, candid and unapologetic. In a 1998 interview, Kyger talks about the journal as her ‘particular refuge’ while among these poets who shared ‘a very strong male

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14 Dalgard and Lauridsen 24.
16 Kyger xi.


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bonding’ and never asked her if she would like to read her poems with them. Snyder’s journal, Passage through India, put together from letters that he wrote to his sister Thea Snyder Lowry, is a more clinical and controlled version, very distinct from Ginsberg. Nevertheless, there is a heightened awareness of being in the land that incubated their spiritual and aesthetic outlook. Compared to Kyger and Snyder’s published journals of this journey, Ginsberg’s Indian Journals captures the immediacy and dynamism of this encounter in a much more visceral manner. It is a variegated and highly dramatic account of his deeply personal and intimate exploration of India; a pulsating tapestry of dreams, sex, drugs, poetry, sketches, memories, photographs, encounters, sights and obsessions.

Playing with the Gods
Ginsberg’s trip to India was preceded and succeeded by estrangements with Peter Orlovsky. Naturally, a sense of loss and an anxiety for new beginnings follow Ginsberg in India. The man who pretended he knew all felt as if he had suddenly run out of every pretension, ‘down in possessions to Peter & a knapsack’ (102). And it slipped out, innocently; the overarching need and drive that is stamped across the Indian Journals – he had wanted to be a saint, but instead had become shameful and boring (11). During the sea journey to India, Ginsberg had armed himself with an impressive array of reading, mostly on spiritual texts about Hinduism and about Indian civilisation and history, but it did not seem to have prepared him for the embodied experience of shrines, rituals, idols, festivals and holy men. This is an important aspect to keep in mind as one reads Indian Journals, particularly since the line between adulation and profanity is a disconcertingly thin one for Ginsberg. He indulges in a constant jesting of the anthropomorphism, ‘fat knees of elephant boy – baby – stone baby Ganesha – Wouldn’t you think you’d seen the verse of your hatchet this axerday – Miss Gannippatti, Parvati’s his mother’ (103); often crude blasphemy that seeks to scandalise, ‘Fuck all Hindu Goddesses / Because they are all prostitutes / (I like to Fuck) / All Hindu Goddesses / are Prostitutes’ (80); or just random silliness peppered over philosophical concerns, ‘I worship Dumbo, the Porpoise’ (100). On the face of it, Ginsberg is being outright disrespectful and offensive. However, as one looks closer, there emerges the possibility that Ginsberg has astutely, probably intuitively, perceived the dualistic approach to the religion, cleverly subverting the concrete face of Hinduism – a veritable melee of gods and goddesses worshipped either in idol form or symbolically, having idiosyncratic personalities and family lives similar to mortals, and hence relatively easy to comprehend – so as to create a shortcut to the more abstract realm of pure metaphysics and high theological debates. And if it is insulting or flippant in the process, it does not matter to Ginsberg; rather, it only adds to his delight in the word-spirit experiment.

Besides, Ginsberg’s reaction to institutionalised Hinduism is no different from the rejection of religious institutions that the Beats practiced in their own country. This search for the wild ascetics was like the ‘beats’ flight from the churches and synagogues of the suburbs to city streets inhabited by whores and junkies, hobos and jazzmen.”

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18 Gary Snyder, Passage Through India (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1972).
19 Farrell writes about Synder’s notion of the Beats as ‘striving for contemplation, morality and wisdom, corresponding roughly to the Buddhist dyana, sila and prajn’(68).
20 Prothero 209.

individualism demanded the finding of some logic in how the self was connected to the life force around it and adapting it to the calling of one’s spirit, the universal and the particular coming together in a single orb of illumination. Nearly everything the Beat writers had done in the aggrandisement of their art, especially Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg, involved glorifying spontaneity, of taking every act to the limit of social mores and then to push it towards histrionics; to critique the absurdity of conservative America and to ‘sacralize the secular, turning everyday existence into a drama of ultimate consequences.’ Kyger describes a soul connection with India as soon as she arrives, though it dissipates upon sustained interaction with the country, ‘I feel constantly to be on the brink – not of understanding – a much bigger feeling ... the religiousness of India seems to bring it out more.’ Religiosity here is not something that needs to be ferreted out; it is an overwhelming and transgressive force that demands accommodating. For Ginsberg, this kind of excess was precisely what he sought and with his typical irreverence he intensifies it further.

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It is obvious that Ginsberg took delight in the variety and novelty of the many Gods in the Hindu pantheon, infinitely more engaging for him than the Judeo-Christian tradition. One sees these unsettling comparisons between Hindu Gods and Western aesthetics in the journal, for instance when Ginsberg wonders how da Vinci could beat an elephant on a mouse (65). Characteristically, he swings between extremes in his fascination. Sometimes the Hindu Gods are inspiring figures offering bold alternatives to the destructive materiality of the West – ‘Vishnu’s Chakra or Discus – E = Mc²’ (21) – and at other times they represent ‘a huge cartoon religion with Disney Gods’ (64). The more gods available for the play of words and thoughts, the more texture it offered his writing, and inevitably more quandaries too. Barely ten pages into the journal, he starts to wonder if a guiding force is needed and soon becomes relentless in his hunt for a spiritual teacher among the holy men and women in India, someone to guide him through the metaphysical maze.

In Search of a Guru
Ginsberg has the same question for all the religious practitioners he meets: could they help him find a Guru who would show him the path to enlightenment, preferably through love and drugs? He is invariably drawn to the ash-covered and matted-haired Shaivaite sadhus with their scant clothing and their love of marijuana. He is able to empathise with their distancing themselves with mainstream society, and their abandon to prayer and intoxication, but for an intellectual creature like himself, the pure sensory experience is limiting and their larger philosophy of life slips through his grasp. Nonetheless, their impact on him is considerable. Among the images that Ginsberg chooses to include in his Indian Journals are those of Shambu Bharti Baba who poses with his trident in three snapshots placed in close succession, the Baba going from a towel wrapped around his waist, to a loin cloth, and then completely bare. The cover of the first edition of Indian Journals is of the same Baba in the nude. The depiction of the various stages of undressing clearly capture more than Ginsberg’s artistic tastes or the Baba’s renunciation. Ginsberg is, and yet is not, a participant in his heart’s deepest longings to be the other man. This is the paradox of how touristic discourse works ‘to

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22 Kyger 157.
23 A reference to the elephant-headed god Ganesh who is often depicted seated on a mouse.

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promote difference while simultaneously erasing it.”

Inevitably, there is the ‘gaze’, the encounter with that which is not the self, and for a spiritual tourist the experience becomes more remote even as the physical distances shrink.

Despite Ginsberg’s frantic efforts to find a way around it, there is a fundamental problem between the workings of Hinduism and the brand of enlightenment that he is in search of. Kyger shrewdly diagnoses this in her journals: ‘His big hangup is that he wants quick enlightenment, he won’t sit or train for it, maybe the way Howl brought him quick fame.’

Ginsberg refers to this constant tension between artistic temperament and spiritual temperance in the koan of a man dangling from a tree with only silence to save his life: ‘The Zen man hanging by his teeth with no other answer’ (51). If the man were to answer the question, he would fall and lose his life, but if he were to remain silent then he is evading the question. Ginsberg cannot help letting go of the figurative branch in his mouth when the Americans get an audience with the Dalai Lama. Having wondered if Buddhism had better solutions for him than Hinduism, Ginsberg grabs an opportunity to ask the Dalai Lama himself. While Snyder and Kyger have questions about meditation and faith, Ginsberg is more interested in knowing about how drug states correspond to the experiences of meditation. Ginsberg saw the asceticism of ancient Hindu and Buddhist mystics as ‘needlessly painful’ when a similar alteration in body chemistry, for transcending the physical form in the spiritual quest for oneness with the divine, could be achieved through drugs.

Ginsberg writes at length about the ‘inside-outside’ visualisation that drugs create (52), the phantasmagoria that a potent mix of drugs and spiritualism inordinately whips up. He compares the hallucinations caused by LSD to the Viswaroopa Darshana in the Bhagvad Gita where Lord Krishna reveals himself and the entirety of creation to be the same in a dazzling cosmic vision (28). However, the Dalai Lama in turn has a question for Ginsberg, one that Ginsberg frames within the dedication to Indian Journals – ‘If you take LSD can you see what’s in that Briefcase?’ (4). The poet-pilgrim had to acknowledge that drugs could only take him so far as the edges of any briefcase, its contents yielding only to a different kind of seeker.

Ginsberg then is soon wondering if he can do this spiritual journey by a different sadhana (a disciplined practice towards self realisation), a concept that has been around in Indian aesthetics for a long time, where art (poetry) is the deliberate discipline for the true seeker. This poses different challenges for him: ‘And Poetry as Sadhana – But to have faith in Who? And love who? & weep for who but all of us Whos alive’ (184). Working on his notes for a lecture to give at a Marxist Literary Conference, Ginsberg spells out the ‘jump of perception’ that he is wanting from his poetry ‘breaking syntactical order / punctuation order / logical orders / old narrative order / meaning order’ (93). Just as his poetry is breaking with discipline, Ginsberg wants his spiritualism to break with discipline, however both tapasya (austerity) and sadhana are antithetical to the kind of rejection of ‘form’ that he is enthusiastic about. This is where India / Hinduism / Buddhism turn out to be tougher than his idealisation of them.

A trip to Brindavan, where Lord Krishna is said to have spent his childhood, and following an encounter with a Hindu holy woman, Ginsberg feels that he needs to stop

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25 Kyger 191.

looking for a living human Guru or a God to worship; rather, the love they inspired had to be the leading light. Sitting on the banks of Ganges, smoking in the company of a sadhu and watching a funeral pyre, he thinks, ‘Man has no right to be’ (102). With that bleakness emerges a realisation that he is in the middle of an important life-experience, one that his literary gurus – e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman and W.C. Williams - did not have access to and his thoughts travel to them: ‘to Cummings, Why? – to literature, with a capital Me. Pound. They never did see India – glad I got here I thought by road.’ (102). The time spent moving across India becomes a teaching, the deepest self acting as a guru, the journey cleansing the spirit as much as the arrival at the holy shrine.

Thoughts of artistic immortality for Ginsberg are closely shadowed by thoughts of the corporal self, the mortality of the flesh. If one dominant image were to be picked out of the Indian Journals, it would have to be the slow graphic disintegration of a human body in a blazing pyre. Death is a towering Ginsberg obsession during his time in India; almost nothing comes close enough, not even his lover who is a constant presence in the book. Early in the text, during the first few encounters with burning bodies, there are indications that Ginsberg is trying to exorcise himself of his terror of both life and death, ‘the echo of being afraid to be born, to leave Naomi’s womb ... Is the same as being afraid to leave the womb of life & go forth into the State of Death’ (29). As if having resolved to face his demons, he spends long hours at the cremation grounds, sometimes alone, sometimes stoned, sometimes among the company of Bengali poets or sadhus, but his eyes rarely moving away from the burning body. Every detail is captured, how the human fat drips, the brain exposed and charring, how they become ‘meat-dolls’ (61), the eyes ‘popped & white’ (67), the process of cremation demystifying death; often the actions of the ‘pole men’ or the Chandaals are described, again a community of people shunned by most; that their job is just a job, completely matter-of-fact, seems to appeal to him. For Hindus, death is transformation, the body dies but the spirit is reborn over and over again; infinite cyclic patterns that have always been of interest to the Beats. ‘I want the joy of Maya, not only the Dukkha,’ Ginsberg announces (85); not just the suffering but the illusory nature of all emotions, in fact the great illusion itself.

Kyger’s also mentions a visit to the cremation grounds. ‘Shopping and sightseeing all day. The burning ghats.’27 The sights of cremation becoming a part of the tourist experience, as perhaps it is for most Westerners coming to India. Kyger’s words highlight what Ginsberg on the other hand is trying in his journal-writing – pushing the boundaries of his tourist persona, throwing himself into the most alien and morbid and then staying immersed in it till he can glean some form of personal truth. Admittedly, this is still behaving like a tourist, but the raw honesty of his selfishness is an artistic move in itself, a brilliant evocation of transnationalism. The political boundaries that define the United States and India and the vast physical distances that separate them are rendered extraneous to the connection that one human life makes with another, through the common experiences of joy, sorrow, growth and death.

Andrew J. Rotter writes, ‘Americans and Indians were incomplete others, or even selves seen in a distorting mirror ... not static over time.’28 Probably the biggest achievement of Ginsberg as the homo viator is that he is able to look beyond the dichotomy of the new and ancient cultures, of East and West, finding ways to make them blend into one, the dualism of

27 Kyger 173.
28 Rotter xxiv.


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logic and emotions turning into a seamless flow: ‘Reliance on spontaneous writing to capture the whole mind of the Poet – not just what he thinks he should think with his front brain’ (93). In the poem ‘Durga-Kali-Modern Weapons in her Hands’, Ginsberg takes mythological and religious symbols from one world, transposing it on the ‘reality’ of the other, a strange stock-taking of the culture that he has come from, that he is denouncing, and in doing so, turning redundant, almost surreal in a dark brooding way. Hence, Shiva’s trident becomes a Jet, Yama’s Iron Rod is a concentration camp, Indra’s thunderbolt a bomb (21). And suddenly, the distortion in the mirror becomes a desirable dramatic device. The commentary is travelling both ways, into both cultures, and ‘Kali as Statue of Liberty / starts moving with ten arms / reading counterclockwise’ (22). Literature for the Beats, for Ginsberg in particular, was certainly an ‘organized experiment in consciousness’ (93) and in the Indian Journals the experiment is being extended into the body and life of the poet in an explicit manner, offering itself for scrutiny and study in new exciting ways. Their understanding of spirituality as the ‘sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships’ is almost the sub-text of everything that Ginsberg writes when he is in India.

To Shock is to Awaken
‘But how ever recreate India?’ Ginsberg asks (193). Almost impossible, it would seem. A repetitive and almost psychedelic pattern can be traced in the Indian Journals, a movement between lucidity and intoxication, between realisation and confusion, between renunciation and indulgence, certainly not a linear shift between binaries, rather a circular movement where it becomes impossible to locate beginnings and ends, where there is only perpetuation and all states of being and becoming are part of the same sphere of existence. It is not always easy to say where the prose ends and the poetry begins in the text; words tumble with sensations, the language an exaggerated enactment and at times desperately over-performed too. ‘Monotone years waiting for thee Traveller / faster than light or Sex abstraction ... I am a lost soul, a poor lost soul’ (173). At first encounter, many of the entries read like the antics of an adolescent trying to garner attention – swearing outrageously, over-indulging, throwing tantrums, swinging from self-adulation to self-pity to self-destruction, trying constantly to shock. Who was he trying to shock, the Indians who would dismiss his eccentricity as a white man’s ‘self-indulgence’ or Americans who had already accepted him as one of the ‘bad boys’ of Beat? To shock either or both was only too easy for a talent like Ginsberg. After all, being a liminal figure was a matter of pride and effortlessly claimed in Beat philosophy. It seemed more likely that he was desperately trying to shock himself, upping the stakes each time he could not. In a country where propriety is highly valued, he seems to feel a greater pressure to strain and push against imagined and real cultural boundaries, but even more against his own creative faculties, his sanity and his self-identity. In fact, Indian Journals does not reveal much about the India of the sixties that Ginsberg saw, but ‘reveals more about the priorities of his own culture.’ It is a confessional that is both individual and collective at the same time.

29 Prothero 214.
30 John Lardas points out to how the Beats employed a ‘liminal strategy’ in their lives and literature, which as a process of deep play was one of delineation, of probing the boundaries of human behavior and the sharp edges of social facts (29).
31 Stephens 59.

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Why does Ginsberg want to tell all? Biographer Bill Morgan points out that Ginsberg had developed a method of writing of prose snippets for the purpose of converting those fragments into poems;\(^{32}\) and perhaps the journal was at times a means to an end, but it also offers to readers motivations and confessions that suggest a work of art being consciously constructed. The confessional approach to poetry that Ginsberg had found with *Howl* created new dynamics between the sensual and the spiritual and ‘was a way to realign the self with the cosmos through the drama of introversion.’\(^{33}\) *Indian Journals* could in fact be read entirely as a confessional prose-poem-travelogue. The sustained and heightened self-consciousness makes it irresistible, the kind of voyeuristic gratification that audiences derive from reality shows on television where participants spill out their deepest secrets.

Many of his journal entries contain graphic details of Ginsberg’s sexual acts with Orlovsky; and repeated elaboration of his belief that sex and eroticism are also acts of self-realisation. There is inspiration to be found in the religion he is exploring. The phallic shape has been worshipped for ages in many Hindu temples as the Shiva lingam. ‘Lingams worshipped here,’ Ginsberg notes and draws a penis alongside (100). The erotic is at easy access and even though it remains heavily symbolic, it becomes a powerful source for inspiration for the poet.

Yet, at the same time, there is an instinctive rebellion and aversion to what Ginsberg knows he ‘ought to’ enjoy as a tourist in India. The visit to the Taj Mahal, the ultimate tourist destination in India, is probably an exception. Otherwise, the *Indian Journals* is oblivious to the profusion of colour, cultural variety and natural beauty of India. It spills over with description of burning bodies, disease, decay, decadence – all magnified and adulated. In repulsion Ginsberg finds attraction, and in attraction he finds himself. The motif of finding himself is similarly closely sutured to the motif of losing himself, either in drugs or sex or the intensity of life on Indian streets. Open any page of the *Indian Journals* and neither day nor place is important, only that self-repulsion and self-attraction constantly playing itself out on the very edge of consciousness. We learn so little about the itinerary and logistics of events and places around the travelers in those 16 months, but we do learn of the shifts within Ginsberg and it is riveting in the pitch and scale of the drama, as ‘epic’ and climactic as he believes himself to deserve. He is the chosen one, born for the spotlight, and India providing the slightly shaky but grand enough stage. Even when he pities himself, there are pleasures, ‘Nobody loves me, I’m old / ugly Allen Now like I dreamed I always / was when I was tender boy with hide-outs / rubbing my flesh tube down in my legs’ (175). Snyder, who was the catalyst to the India trip, gets cursory mentions in the *Indian Journals* and Kyger is almost not there. Orlovsky comes and goes in the narrative in waves of desire and lust. There is Ginsberg and only Ginsberg in this India. But even this Ginsberg is not entirely real, at times an entirely fictitious persona. Lardas writes, ‘as the Beats imagined America, they could not help but imagine themselves.’\(^{34}\) The self / poet that Ginsberg imagines and projects is deliberately mystified as was his larger public image. Hailed by the counterculture

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\(^{33}\) Lardas 153.

\(^{34}\) He connects this imagining to a claim by Ginsberg that the early Beat agenda was focused on the transmission of cultural values form the individual to the rest of the society (136).

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movement as ‘America’s greatest Hindu guru,’\textsuperscript{35} some of what Ginsberg propounded, like\textit{mantras} (chants), yoga practices, \textit{mudras} (hand gestures) became part of the culture and eventually very soon led to what Julie Stephens calls a ‘consumption’ of India through ‘diverse commodities, rituals, language and ideas.’\textsuperscript{36} This became apparent as the sixties progressed and the ‘hippie trail’ brought the American counterculture to India in human waves.

Gary Snyder takes care to clarify that he and his fellow travellers in India, including Ginsberg, were ‘in advance of the counterculture invasion (which came more from Europe than the U.S) and weren’t burdened with too many visionary expectations’\textsuperscript{37} but also agrees that the Beat Generation transformed into the hippie-generation.\textsuperscript{38} The Hare Krishna movement that began in New York in 1966 reinforced India as both pilgrimage and holy destination. Since the separation between mainstream America and the counterculture was highly permeable,\textsuperscript{39} what fired the imagination of a small albeit experimental section of society soon gathered credence in the national consciousness. In fact, Dale Riepe argues that India has had more influence on American philosophic thought than any other non-Western culture.\textsuperscript{40} This was certainly true for the war-weary American youth of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. As forerunners to the counterculture and as pilgrims who had actually been to India, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder were invited to the first ‘Be-In’ in San Francisco in 1967, a gathering meant to ‘show that hippies and radicals were one.’\textsuperscript{41} Here they performed the Hindu rite of \textit{pradikshina} (circumambulation usually done around the sanctum sanctorum in temples) of a polo field and the whole event was accorded the status of a pilgrimage gathering. Through such enactments, the individual quest and experientiality of the (Beat) poet was consciously shared and turned into a communal space, and probably explains the transformation of the \textit{Indian Journals} from an intimate travel diary to an unapologetic book addressed to the public. For Ginsberg, \textit{Indian Journals} became an exceptional polyphonic literary terrain to showcase and engage with multiple cultures, a bridge for alternate spiritual explorations. This was the beginning of the process whereby India established itself as an integral, and continually self-reinventing, part of the American post-war imagination. The poet, through India, had found a way to be a priest.

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\textsuperscript{37} Snyder ix.
\textsuperscript{38} Dalgard and Lauridsen 68.

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