

Globalization of Buddhism and Vaishnavism through the Beat Poets and the Beatles

Sudeshna Majumdar

Abstract

Globalization is primarily the fallout of economic activities that has social and cultural impacts. The free flow of goods and capital from one country to another and has deep impacts on cultural sphere and thereby it gives culture an inclusive and borderless identity. India has been a major catalyst to global cultural crossovers since the ancient era till date. In the ancient era it was Buddhism that acted as India's main vehicle to extend its cultural frontiers up to the Central Asia and the South-east Asia, whereas in modern world it is the Krishna Consciousness that swayed many creative minds in the West. This essay attempts to identify the global repercussions of Buddhism and Vaishnavism while analysing their impact on the two important exponents of British and American culture, namely, the British musician George Harrison and the American poet Allen Ginsberg.

Keywords : Beat Generation; Buddhism; Globalization; Krishna Consciousness; The Beatles.

Introduction

Globalization is primarily the result of economic activities that have social and cultural impacts. The free flow of goods and capital from one country to another has deep impacts on the cultural sphere, thereby giving culture an inclusive and borderless identity. India has been a major catalyst for global cultural crossovers since the ancient era. In the ancient era (since 1st-century CE) it was Buddhism that acted as India's main vehicle to extend its cultural frontiers up to Central and South-east Asia, whereas in modern world it is the Krishna Consciousness that has swayed many creative minds in the West. This essay attempts to identify the global repercussions of Buddhism and Vaishnavism while analyzing their impact on the two important exponents of British and American culture, namely, the

British musician George Harrison and the American poet Allen Ginsberg.

Material and Methods

In this study, poems by the Beat poets and song lyrics by the Beatles have been consulted as primary materials to decipher the spiritual contents of these poems and songs with reference to Buddhism and Vaishnavism. Besides, various websites, blog articles, and social events were consulted, all that created a perspective for the understanding of the socio-historical contexts of these two religious movements and their repercussions in Europe and America. In this study, descriptive methodology has been applied to analyse the songs and poems (primary materials) and secondary works on Allen Ginsberg, George Harrison, Buddhism, and Krishna Consciousness. The description is then followed by an explanation and interpretation of the findings, with examples.

Origin of the Research Problem

Buddhism has a long tradition of missionary pursuit that disseminated the faith in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Tibet, China and Japan, and in parts of Central Asia up to Bactria. Under the royal patronage of King Ashoka since 250 BCE and also under the patronage of the Kusana kings of Central Asia about 106 CE Buddhism attained a global character in ancient times indicating a borderless identity of the faith. Tantric Buddhism or *Vajrayana* that combined elements of Hindu mythology with esoteric Buddhism percolated through Tibet and China into Japan. Many Hindu deities, such as Saraswati, Lakshmi, Kubera, and Viswakarma, thus entered Japanese culture in metamorphosed forms. Incidentally, the commercial popularity of the Laughing Buddha as a symbol of prosperity and happiness indicates the convergence of Buddhism and the traditional Chinese philosophy of Taoism, based on the principles of happiness, harmony, and natural pleasure. In the modern world though Buddhist religious hubs of South-East Asia faced challenges from European colonization, Buddhism countered the dominance of Christianity by reinventing itself in a more popular form under Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), who conveyed Buddhist teachings to Europe and America. Recent spiritual trends in Europe and America regarding the faith of Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes Vipassana meditation, the Dalai Lama's visits to Western countries in 1973 and 1979, and the popularity of Japanese Reiki as an alternative spiritual medicine, indicate the globalization of Buddhism in the contemporary world.

ISKCON, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which has earned the popular name "Hare Krishna Movement," has been in vogue in Europe and America since the 1960s. ISKCON was founded in 1966 in America by Swami Prabhupada, and since then it has attracted several American and European devotees under a popularized version of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. ISKCON the organization for promoting the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness worldwide, takes the help of websites, blogs, and social media such as, iskcon.org, Facebook pages of different ISKCON centres, iskcondwarka.org, the ISKCON Desire Tree, iskcon-news.org, krishna.org, iskconuk.com, thespiritualscientist.com, and many more to promote a popular version of Vaishnavism.

These inter-ethnic dialogues and cross-cultural impulses have been subject to academic investigation since the 1950s with the rise of culture studies. Evidence of cultural fusion in the songs of George Harrison and frequent references to Eastern religions in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg invite us to examine critically the popularity of Buddhism and Vaishnavism in the Western world. Nowadays the ideologies related to Buddhism and the Krishna Consciousness, disseminated through social media and artefacts, like Krishna and Buddha statues and photos, prayer wheels, holy bracelets, incense holders and sticks, tulsī beads and lockets with photos of Radha-Krishna, Buddha and holy symbols printed on them, sandalwood sticks, perfumes, Zen plants, crystals and DVDs on meditation make these two faiths commercially viable across the world.

Ginsberg and Harrison: Their Syncretistic Approach towards Literature and Art

The term 'Beat Generation,' which bore the connotation of the word 'beatific' ('holy bliss'), was most appropriately expressed through the spirituality of its greatest exponent, Allen Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) combined elements of Christianity, Judaism, Native American, Buddhist, and Vaishnava traditions in his poetry. He embraced Krishna Consciousness following his visit to India with poet Gary Snyder in 1962, and in the early 1970s he became a follower of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, Ginsberg showed Americans the path towards Asian spirituality. After the poet's death in 1997, Chris Smith recounts in an obituary how Allen Ginsberg chanted 'Hare Krishna' and Buddhist prayers during his interviews and poetry reading sessions, which expressed the spiritual facet of his personality, though the audience often took it as an act of showmanship of the Beat poets (Smith, *religionnews.com*). In an address to a group of students in 1993 Ginsberg recalled how Buddha's philosophy attracted him

and why. Along with fellow Beat generation poets William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg was looking for a new perspective of life in a post-atomic bomb war-torn world, where scientific progress was synonymous with degeneration. And they found this alternative worldview in the art of poetry. For Ginsberg, his art became his religion, which he defined as “more durable spirituality” (Ginsberg, 1993). He applied his Buddhist orientation and Krishna Consciousness in his protests for human rights and eco-centric agricultural reforms. During his 1962 visit to India Ginsberg had a pilgrimage to Saranath, Sanchi, Ajanta and Ellora. The next year he visited Angkor Wat in Cambodia, which had a deep impact on his creative life. The temples and iconography of Angkor Wat show a fusion of Buddhist and Hindu architecture that found a poetic equivalent in Ginsberg’s poem ‘Angkor Wat’ (1963). The poem contains a mixed rhetoric of Buddhism and Krishna Consciousness, where he affirms that he is taking refuge before the “open-handed Lotus Man’s cross legged” image. He finds solace in the ‘Buddha Dharma Sangha’, while combining it with the chant “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna/ Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.” The poem closes with the Buddhist phrase ‘saranam gacchami gacchami’ (Ginsberg, ‘Angkor Wat’). Thus for Ginsberg, poetry opened a sphere of syncretism. The serenity and submission latent within Buddhism and Vaishnavism complemented the idea of martyrdom and love ingrained within Christianity and Ginsberg’s fusion of multiple faiths within his poetry seemed to define the inclusive core of his personal religion.

Incidentally, it was Allen Ginsberg, who introduced Indian ‘mantras’ in the world of rock and roll and also chanted “om” during a public protest in 1968 in Chicago to pacify the crowd (Ginsberg, “Mad Tyger”). In 1967 Ginsberg’s participation in the Mantra-Rock Dance, a musical event organized by the US wing of ISKCON, speaks volumes about the cultural crossover that was taking place in America via Indian spirituality.

George Harrison (1943-2001) was a man of eclectic interests: he combines Western rock n’ roll with Indian classical music, and in his famous song “My Sweet Lord” (1969), he combines the Hebrew prayer *hallelujah* with the Vaishnava chant ‘hare rama hare krishna’. The song “My Sweet Lord” is a yardstick musical experiment of the Beatles. In this song the ceaseless “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” chant is intercepted by the Judeo-Christian prayer call *Hallelujah* (Hail to Thee, Jehovah), which is again complemented by the refrain “My Sweet Lord” (an address to Lord Krishna). These juxtaposed prayers in the lyrics indicate an assimilation of two different cultures under the common note of devotional adoration to the Supreme Being. Harrison thus attempts to infuse the Bhagavat Vaishnava tradition

within the Judeo-Christian tradition in his spiritual quest through music. When he visited India in the 1960s, he underwent a spiritual awakening and subsequently embraced the 'Hare Krishna' Movement. In his autobiography, *I, Me, Mine*, he records this Indian pilgrimage: in this world, each soul comes with the sole purpose of self-realization, and every soul is potentially divine. According to him, the goal of life is to realize that divinity within man. The spiritual journey of George Harrison into Vaishnava philosophy made him compose another famous song, '*govindam âdi purusham*' in 1969, in which he hails Govinda as 'the Primary Being'. The traditional mythical portrayal of Krishna from Harrison's Western perspective is quite interesting. In this song Krishna plays the flute, his body is like a blue cloud; his eyes are like lotus petals, and he wears a peacock's feather in his hair (Harrison, "Govinda"). This absorption of Indian myths by the Western psyche is a unique aspect of cultural fusion that highlights the influence of Eastern spirituality on Western materialism.

Along with John Lennon, Harrison met Swami Prabhupada, the initiator of the world-wide Hare Krishna Movement. His friendship with the Indian sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar was seminal to his acquaintance with Indian Classical Music and Vedic prayers. *Chants of India* (1996) is his collaborative musical venture with Ravi Shankar, which suggests Harrison's cultural exposure to the Vedic tradition besides Vaishnavism. Harrison's famous albums *All Things Must Pass*, and *Living in the Material World* contain prominent traces of Vaishnava philosophy. The songs, "What is Life", "Behind the Locked Door", and "If Not for You" from the album *All Things Must Pass* are poignant with tone of overwhelming love amounting to spiritual submission. The strong emotional appeal of "Tell me who am I without you by my side" or "Come and let out my heart, please please/ From behind that locked door" suggests love as the guiding force of Harrison's music.

Incidentally, the figure of Krishna in the Vaishnava tradition is conceived in the aura of all-encompassing Love and Joy, which made Harrison's message of love philosophically so eloquent. The title song "All things must pass" contains the spirit of stoic submission and yet an affirmative belief in renewal of life: "A mind can blow those clouds away" (Harrison, "All Things Must Pass"). His lifelong association with the UK branch of ISKCON made him compose the "Hare Krishna Mantra" for the Anglophone followers of Krishna Consciousness across the world. It was through George Harrison that the Beatles became interested in Indian culture and fused Indian melodies within Western chords. Thus the Krishna Consciousness gained much popularity among the young Western hippies through the figure of a popular cultural icon like George Harrison.

Result and Discussion: Socio-Cultural Significance of Buddhism and Krishna Consciousness

In postmodern culture, media has become the major thread conveying these concepts across the globe. In the modern world, both Buddhism and Krishna Consciousness are extensively generated through social media and internet blogging, which can be examples of religious globalization. Thus, ISKCON connects the world through media under a single faith. Inspired by Eastern spirituality of Buddhism and Krishna Consciousness the American Beat Generation poets of the 1950s and the British rock-band Beatles of the 1960s brought a new lease of non-conformity into social structure through counterculture. The counterculture of the 1960s celebrated new cultural forms that experimented with hippie lifestyles and a vibrant subculture, which included casual dressing, and advertisement-oriented consumerism. It was related to other socio-cultural movements such as, Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, the Gay Movement, and other anti-establishment forums. During this time, wearing jeans became a unisex fashion statement, which accommodated both men and women, and the trend continues to this day.

Counterculture activists highlighted the plight of the poor, environmental concerns, anti-nuclear protests, while advocating freedom of speech, right of voting for women and African-Americans. They demanded rights for people with alternative sexuality and for the differently-abled persons. The counterculture was marked by psychedelic drug-induced songs and poetry, colourful comic strips, experimental art, and cinema. Enjoyment of sex and recreational drugs such as LSD and marijuana were regarded as symbols of freedom. London in the 1960s witnessed two parallel trends of subculture known as "Mod" and "Rockers". Followers of these groups were young Englishmen, who listened to jazz, blues, and rock music and were drawn towards pop-art. Thus, London in the 1960s became a hub of mass culture, promoting fashion, music, and pop art. This period is often referred to as the 'Swinging Sixties'.

Counterculture was a worldwide anti-establishment discourse in which artists and activists from Europe, America, and Asia participated. It was also marked by a syncretistic spirit, because the hippies were drawn towards Hinduism, Buddhism, the Vaishnava Cult, and other exotic ethnic religious practices. Fusing all these customs they seemed to form an amalgamated faith, which later gave way to a coinage called 'the hippie culture'. Exponents of counterculture ranged from The Beatles in England, the American Beat Generation poets and critics Allen Ginsberg

(1926-1997), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Gary Snyder (b.1930), artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987), singers George Harrison (1943-2001), John Lennon (1940-1980), Joan Baez (b. 1941), Bob Dylan (b. 1941), and Pete Seeger (1919-2014), to the revolutionary Che Guevara (1928-1967), the environmentalist Rachel Carson (1907-1964) and the athlete Muhammad Ali (1942-2016).

Harrison's music and Ginsberg's poetry are marked by a syncretistic impulse in the sense they bring in multiple cultural associations within their creative spaces of poetry and music. Perhaps syncretism not in its technical religious sense, because Harrison does not blend Vaishnavism and Christianity into a new religious system, nor does Ginsberg mingle Buddhism with Christianity into a brand new systematic religion. In both contexts, the amalgamation takes place in creative realms, but no new faith is created out of it. However, if syncretism is taken in its associative free spirit, it indicates a mingling of different cultures and religious thoughts under certain universal human qualities such as, love, peace and joy. From this angle, the intercultural/ syncretistic spiritual stances of Allen Ginsberg and George Harrison generated extensive research on the international circuit. Syncretism is marked by a certain hybrid characteristic, which can be felt in Ginsberg's adulation to both Buddha and Krishna at the shrine of Angkor Wat, and in Harrison's free movement between Krishna and Christ as his 'Sweet Lord'.

Allen Ginsberg's spiritual orientation has been subject to the critical enquiry of scholars since his visits to India in 1962. In the essay "The Vomit of a Mad Tyger," Ginsberg gives his own account of his spiritual initiation into Buddhism through fellow novelist Jack Kerouac and poet Gary Snyder. He recalled, how Kerouac introduced him to a 'Buddhist Bible' that contained some translations of Buddhist *sutras* and rules of *vinaya* that struck him with the interpretation of human existence and suffering. In this memoir he refers to his 1953 poem 'humility is beatness', where he deals with the image of *Shakyamuni* (Buddha) coming out of his meditation. Ginsberg's assimilative stance was evident as he compared the Sanskrit term 'dukkha' with the Yiddish term 'tsuris' (trouble) in an address to a group of students in 1993. A number of books on spiritual consciousness in modern America refer to Allen Ginsberg's spiritual journey through Buddhism into Vaishnavism and his propagation of Mantra-Rock Dance that was a fusion of rock music and Hare Krishna chanting. D. Wills, in his edited volume *Buddhism and the Beats* (2007), and Ellwood & Baxter, in their study *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (1988), refer to Ginsberg's tryst with Buddhism, Tony Trigilio's study *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics* (2007) offers a deeper look into the poet's spiritual world

and examines its reflection in his poetry. Ginsberg's later inclination towards the Hare Krishna cult is discussed in texts like *The Hare Krishnas in India* (1992) by Charles R. Brooks and *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (1989) by David Bromsley and Larry D. Shinn.

The famous British rock-musician George Harrison, who was the lead guitarist, songwriter, and singer of the Beatles, was remarkable for his adherence to the Eastern spirituality of Bhagavat Vaishnavism. George Harrison's syncretistic outlook has been extensively discussed in the 2007 book *Here Comes the Sun: The Spiritual and Musical Journey of George Harrison* (2007) by Joshua M. Greene. Apart from that various blogs on the Beatles (namely, *The Beatle's Bible*, *beatlestory.com*) recount how George Harrison's spiritual quest into Krishna Consciousness influenced the music of the Beatles. Christopher Partridge's work *The Re-enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacrilization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (2005) touches some of the key spiritual turning points in the life of Harrison, whereas Gary Tillery's study *Working Class Mystic: A Spiritual Biography of George Harrison* (2011) makes a detailed commentary on the musician's experimentation with Indian Spirituality and Indian Music.

Besides, there are numerous internet articles on George Harrison's religious views such as "How George Harrison's Lifelong Quest for Spiritual Enlightenment Shaped his Music and Life" (2021) by Kenneth Womack, "Meditation on the Man who saved The Beatles" by Allan Kozinn (2008), "George Harrison: The Most Spiritual Beatle" by Jean Bakula, "Six Lesser Known Spiritual Songs by George Harrison: The Hindu Beatle" (2016) by Nate Rabe, "The Spiritual Quest of George Harrison in Hinduism" (2019) by Subhamoy Das, all of that focus on the influence of Indian culture on this famous British rock-musician. The bulk of literature produced on the syncretistic worldviews of Allen Ginsberg and George Harrison amply proves the global repercussions of these two Indian religious faiths and their amalgamation with Christianity through the Western followers of Buddhism and Vaishnavism. The role of the Beat Poets and the Beatles are therefore pivotal in advocating globalized versions of Buddhist and Vaishnava spirituality through counterculture.

The global impact of Buddhism and Krishna Consciousness as commercial-cultural enterprises is comprehensive because these cults have attracted Western creative figures like Ginsberg and Harrison. From an Indian perspective, it could be counted as a global triumph of Indian spirituality that reaches out to people in the form of a popular commodity through social media. There is no doubt that in this religious-cultural interface and

crossover, the Asian religions have been mutated to a large extent under the influence of the dominant European way of life, nevertheless, they project an alternative discourse of introspection to counter Western materialism. The earnest surrender of a materially saturated self to Krishna is a marker of Harrison's spiritual songs. The song "Hear me Lord" reverberates with a tone of repentance, where the poet asks the Supreme Being to forgive him for his past waywardness. He imagines his Lord as an omnipresent entity: "To the left and the right/ Above and below us/ Out and in, there's no place that You're not in" and his ultimate wish is to overcome this material desire: "Help me Lord, please/ To burn out this desire" (Harrison, "Hear me Lord"). Ginsberg touched the similar chord as he wrote his spiritual poems of *Mind Breaths: Poems 1972-1977* most of that dealt with his psychological journey during meditation. His 'mind breaths' seem to travel from Asia across the Pacific towards America and envelop the continent. The way entire Europe swayed to the beats of "Hare Krishna" indicates how the spirit of confession, martyrdom and self-abnegation ingrained within Christianity found a mitigation through the principle of 'ananda' (ecstasy) and creative celebration of life underlying the Krishna Consciousness. The lyrics of George Harrison's spiritual composition "It is 'He' (Jai Sri Krishna)" validate this aspect of life-force underlying the dance of Krishna. He found the inspiration of this song from his visit to Vrindavan.

The music of the song fuses typical Hindi bhajan with Western pop. In these lyrics Krishna is envisioned as the ultimate pivot of our existence ("He whose eyes have seen/ What our lives have been/ And who we really are"), as the source of the sap of life ("He whose sweetness flows/ to anyone of those/ That cares to look His way/ See his smile") (Harrison, "It is He"). Incidentally, Allen Ginsberg too, recalled one of his stage shows, where he did not read out poetry from paper but improvised with a harmonium upon a theme of American materialism and its blind self-centered nature. He painted the ironical image of America as a paradise of material comfort, when everyone else in the world was starving (Ginsberg, 1993). It is important to notice how in that particular performance Ginsberg blended poetry with improvisation and music (with a harmonium), a practice quite popular among the Indian devotees of 'samkirtan'. *Samkirtan* is a musical composition in Vaishnavism, sung in unison by devotees in praise of Krishna and Radha with dance and through spontaneous improvisation called 'akhar'. In this way George Harrison and Allen Ginsberg initiated a new lease of life into the Western psyche through an overwhelming discourse of surrender through love and thus the globalization of Vaishnavism and Buddhism amounted to a comprehensive version of religious syncretism, manifested through cultural and literary exercises.

Works Cited :

- Ginsberg, Allen. "Angkor Wat". <http://www.larsmovin.dk/angkor-wat-a-poem-by-allen-ginsberg-transcript>. Retrieved on 13 Sept. 2021.
- . "The Vomit of a Mad Tyger." *Lion's Roar*. 2 April 2015. <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-vomit-of-a-madtyger>. Retrieved on 10 Sept. 2021.
- . "Buddhism and The Beats". *Ginsberg 1993-I-Intro*. 2017. *The allen ginsberg project*. <https://allenginsberg.org/2017/07/s-j-15/>. Retrieved on 1 Dec. 2022.
- Harrison, George. "Govinda." *Songlyrics*. <http://www.songlyrics.com>. Retrieved on 13 Sept. 2021.
- . "All Things Must Pass". *Genius.com*. <https://genius.com/George-harrison-all-things-must-pass-lyrics>. Retrieved on 30 Nov. 2022.
- . "Hear me Lord". *Genius.com*. <https://genius.com/George-harrison-hear-me-lord-lyrics>. Retrieved on 1 Dec. 2022.
- . "It is 'He' (Jai Sri Krishna)." *Genius.com*. <https://genius.com/George-harrison-it-is-he-jai-sri-krishna-lyrics>. Retrieved on 29 Nov. 2022.
- Smith, Chris. "Religion at heart of Allen Ginsberg's life, poetry. 1 Jan. 1997. <https://religionnews.com/1997/01/01/news-story-religion-at-heart-of-allen-ginsbergs-life-poetry/>. Retrieved on 13 Sept. 2021.