

Text and Context: Ginsberg along the Jessore Road in 1971

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Abstract

The poor living conditions of the internally displaced people of Bangladesh at the Indian refugee camps during the months of the war of liberation in 1971 struck a deep chord with the philanthropic western minds, a handful of whom came in person to visit these camps. One of these people was the poet Allen Ginsberg, who, unlike a typical social worker, felt compelled within to address the global consciousness in an idiosyncratic way. Ginsberg's "September on Jessore Road" was recited and sung by the poet himself in the tradition of the blues; but it counts more for its detailed account of the shocking ailment of the scared mob haunted by the atrocities of the Pakistani army. This paper is intent on assaying how the backdrop of the war-ridden Bangladesh affected Ginsberg's poetic mind, resulting in a text dipped in a humanitarian appeal, which potently sketches the images of the sufferings of the distressed evacuees.

The emotional space traversed across the body of the poem "September on Jessore Road" (henceforth "Jessore Road") is hardwired into the misery of a nation in feud that coupled with Allen Ginsberg's personal experiences. Depicting the plight of the refugees and the heartfelt compassion of an American observer, this lyric poem has, in fact, become a historical document of the liberation war of Bangladesh. Allen Ginsberg, a precursor of the controversial beat generation poets, at the time of composing the poem, was already famous for his "Howl" (1956), where he bemoaned the suffering of the best minds of his generation. Coming across a host of refugee camps he visited in 1971, the poet tried to gauge the extent of suffering the ailing refugees had to go through. This renewed understanding of human affliction combined with an unceasing protest against the indifferent authorities and institutions reverberates in the picturesque verses of the poem.

The nine month-long liberation war of Bangladesh is consequent upon the political collapse caused by the studied procrastination of the then West Pakistan government. President Yahya Khan dallied in handing over the power to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who in the general election of 1970 got the mandate to rule the then East Pakistan. A series of closed door meetings followed and resulted in a betrayal by the West Pakistan authority. Consequently, in the famous March 7 speech Bangabandhu declared a total shutdown while laying out a plan for an imminent war of independence to form a new nation: Bangladesh. On the other hand, as part of the plan to subdue the civil unrest and to suppress the rebellion, Yahya initiated Operation Searchlight in the dead of night on March 25. He had Bangabandhu arrested and deported

to West Pakistan for incarceration. However, before the arrest, Bangabandhu declared the independence of Bangladesh in a brief radio message urging his fellow countrymen to resist Pakistani atrocity: "This may be my last message, from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh wherever you might be and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last" (Rahman 1). A provisional government, formed in Mujibnagar on April 10, 1971, was led by the Vice President (Acting President in absence of Bangabandhu) Syed Nazrul Islam. During the nine months of war until victory, Bangladesh experienced one of the most horrific genocides executed by the Pakistani army, one of the many consequences of which was a large scale immigration from Bangladesh to India.

September 1971. Two different episodes of history ran parallel. The first episode began with the brutality of the Pakistani army. Operation Searchlight set the tone of the impending onslaught on the people of Bangladesh. Starting from Dhaka, the effect of this crackdown was felt quickly in other parts of the country as the Army advanced into the more remote corners with one agenda: to terrorize the masses by butchering as many as they could, irrespective of religion and caste. The result was a nearly uncountable number of people belonging to every sect and class swarming towards India for safe shelter. This was the largest migration of refugees in the latter half of the twentieth century (Grbac *McGill Blogs*). According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), about ten million Bangladeshis crossed the border and sought refuge at the 825 Indian refugee camps located at different places. West Bengal alone had to host over seven million refugees occupying schools, open fields, parks, streets, deserted buildings, footpaths, and any other available place (Rahman 560-572).

Many of the refugees walked long distances of up to 150 miles to be on the other side of the border. Those who could, managed to travel along the usual routes, but those who could not, made a detour along the roads as the borders were sealed by the Pakistani army; they took unusual paths through jungles, rivers, and swamps along the 1300-mile-long border with India. On some occasions, around 50,000 refugees came to different camps in a single day (Singh 462). Due to starvation or sickness or fatal wounds caused during the manhunt by the Pakistanis, a lot of them could not survive the journey. Those who managed to arrive at the camps started vomiting just after finishing their first meal. Ration cards were issued to the refugees with insufficient and irregular supply of relief. Sometimes it was only once a week the ration was distributed, and the refugees had to save their sanction for the next days by eating just one meal a day. Scarcity of proper sanitation system at these camps threatened the minimum healthcare facilities with the increasing risks of cholera epidemic. Medication was also inadequate with only a few physicians and health workers available, though vaccination was a priority to prevent the threat of cholera. These refugees had to leave their ancestral homes behind along with all their belongings, and then at the camps they had to live on the charity of relief workers and volunteers. The local government of the province of West Bengal together with the authorization of the Indian central government tried to manage the situation, which was in effect far beyond its capacity. To avoid an imminent disaster, the Indian government asked international communities to come forward with aid (Singh 463-64).

In his memoir, *Muktijuddhe Bideshi Bondhura* (The Foreign Comrades in the War of Liberation), Fakir Alamgir records the significance of the historical Jessore Road which connects West Bengal's Kolkata (previously Calcutta) to Bangladesh's Jessore, as the most used land route between the two Bengals before the partition in 1947. With the emergence of India and Pakistan and because of the constant political turmoil between the two nations, the road gradually lost its importance as the number of travelers decreased, following which trade also reduced substantially. Eventually, the border along the Jessore Road became almost a deserted highway (186). However, the same highway became the hub of the escape routes for the terrified refugees throughout the riotous days of 1971. "During the war of 1971," says Shalil Tripathi, "it was one of the lifelines that connected refugees from East Pakistan, fleeing war and massacre, to India" (Caravan Magazine.in). The significance of Jessore Road in the minds of people as a guaranteed thoroughfare to life during the liberation war of Bangladesh as well as its symbolic association to humanity in crises, therefore gains momentum and warrants proper attention.

The second episode of this history marks the time when the Lila Company arranged a charity show for Bangladesh titled *People's Shadhana*. Lila Company comprised Rufus Collins, Axel Hyppolite, Leo Treviglio, Diana Van Tosh, Alexander Vanderlinden, and Olivier Boelen. It was an apolitical faction of the famous Living Theatre in New York. They came to India a year before to reaffirm their spirituality, with a quest for setting up a spiritual theater. *People's Shadhana* was their Indian premiere. Olivier Boelen, the producer of the charity show, tried his best to make the show a success, inviting all those concerned with the cause of Bangladesh (Perry, *Rolling Stone*). Being of the Beat generation, Allen Ginsberg shared familiar apolitical and nonconformist views of the Lila troupe, and was one of them, concerned about the distress of Bangladeshi people, especially the refugees living at the Indian camps. Ginsberg's previous visit to India in 1961 was his spiritual quest when he was influenced by a group of young Bengali artists, a few of the *Krittibas*¹ poets belonging to the literary movement called Hungry Generation. It was the time when he befriended Sunil Gangopadhyay, a famous poet and novelist in Bangla literature (Deborah Baker). Unlike the previous tour in India which lasted about two years, this time the poet came here only for two weeks with an invitation from the Lila Company along with his own inquisitiveness to observe the real condition of the refugees.

A precursor and spokesman of the radical American generation called the Beat, Ginsberg himself was an antiestablishment and antimilitary voice of his own time. As was the case during the late 40s and early 50s at the time of emergence of the Beat generation, the fabric of the American social system, as an impact of World War II, was torn apart. This period in American history was a time of subcultures created by junkies, bikers, gays, African-Americans and other immigrants, juvenile delinquents, and so on, who predominantly lived in the poor neighborhoods and ghettos. Frustrated and exhausted with the postwar pro-capitalist society, the Beats created a new lifestyle rejecting mainstream American culture. They were largely fascinated by the restless energy of the underworld, and by "[e]xperimenting with drugs, crimes, sex and jazz, the Beats tried to shatter every taboo that the straight world held" (Russell 10). Among the African-American jazz circles, the word "beat" meant broke

or exhausted, but for intellectuals like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs and Ginsberg, “beat” meant both exhaustion and empowerment. “If something was beat”, says Jamie Russell, “it wasn’t simply downtrodden by life in postwar America, it also rejected the oppressive world around it, transforming exhaustion into defiance and reaching towards religious transformation (‘beatitude’)” (11).

The publication of *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), illustrating the stinging frustration of his generation, garnered immediate response from readers and set the stage for the emergence of an iconoclastic voice in American poetry. Ginsberg, about the context of “Howl”, writes, “[I]n publishing ‘Howl’, I was curious to leave behind after my generation an emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in US consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalist complex solidified into a repressive police bureaucracy” (qtd. in Charters, *Modern American Poetry*). The event of the San Francisco police seizing the remaining copies of the book followed by the famous obscenity trial officially acknowledged the influence of the poet over the contemporary readers. By 1961, when Ginsberg came to India for the first time, he was already a much-talked-about literary figure torn apart by his personal as well as emotional crises. The quest for a spiritual guidance is evident in his two-year stay in India and frequent visits to temples and shrines across the country during that time.

Ginsberg, as a poet, was much indebted to William Blake and to the hallucination that Blake was reading him one of his (Blake’s) poems followed by a vision about “the unity of the universe and his place in it” (Russell 35). A disturbing and threatening feature in his poetic vision is the existence of the enemy figure Moloch who synonymously stands for capitalism and military bureaucracy destroying the soul and forcing the “angel” (true human essence) to find new worlds to reside in. Moloch, according to Allen Grossman “is quite simply the image of the objective world of which the economic culture of America is the demiurgic creator” (107). In “Howl” the poet repeatedly mentions this name and attributes to it all the disasters, both psychic and social. Nonetheless, he concurrently searches for inspiration to fight against it. In addition, the memories of the holocaust influence Ginsberg’s poetry to some extent. Though the Second World War did not take place on American soil, and though the poet was too young to experience it as either a soldier or a civilian, Grossman thinks that his Jewish ancestry, bespeaking of a longstanding history of overthrow, loss, and extinction, anticipates the poet to be a potential figure to interpret the horror of the holocaust. But in his poetry, he turns his experience of the holocaust into a collective memory as it is “[t]he tendency of recent American poetry to represent the terrors of history in terms of purely mental agony is almost universal” (Grossman 108).

On September 9, 1971, Allen Ginsberg, accompanied by Sunil Gangopadhyay and John Giorno² (fellow American poet and performance artist), travelled along the Jessore Road and came to the border town of Bongaon. The refugee camp of Bongaon was comparatively larger and well-kept as the foreign delegates used to frequent it to have an overall perception of the distress of these unfortunate people. Yet, the rundown camp and its proximity disturbed the poetic mind of Ginsberg. The camp opened at the beginning of April when the influx had just begun, and closed by the end of July, with about 50000 people living there. Ginsberg was surrounded by

people of different ages—each of them with a hollow gape and an anticipatory look. Deborah Baker, in *A Blue Hand: Allen Ginsberg and the Beats in India*, describes Ginsberg’s experience in the refugee camp:

As they went along, Ginsberg recited his immediate impressions into a tape recorder: “Straw shops by the roadside waiting for food all day. Smells of shit and food and bidis. Heavy rain, cholera epidemic. A man standing on the road with a many-pronged spear. Tensions between poor residents and refugees. ‘You are behaving like a lord,’ the refugees complain to the poor villagers. ‘The refugees are shitting on our lawns,’ the residents complain.” (qtd. in Raghavan 146)

The poet along with the Lila troupe and Charles Perry, former editor of the *Rolling Stone* magazine, after the second day’s show, visited another adjoining, even larger, camp hosting about 175,000 refugees. Perry reports on October 28, 1971:

It seems strange, until you see these people, that cholera, which is just a violent form of dysentery, could be a deadly plague. They are just inches from malnutrition. If their digestion is strained, they have no food reserves in their body. ... We looked at each other helplessly. There was nothing more to say. I didn’t even have any rupees to give. ... A drop in this bucket of 175,000 people. ... Ginsberg had disappeared in the depths of the camp with his tape recorder and lost track of the time. The rest of the party waited in the bus for an hour and finally left him to catch a taxi back to town. (*Rolling Stone*)

It seems that the poet drowned in the mass of these helpless faces and was seeking some sort of desperate measures for them. What the poet was up to was known to the world only after he had returned to his country. He wrote “Jessore Road” between November 14-16, 1971, and the poem was published in the *New York Times* in November and December 1971 consecutively. Ashok Shahane³ published the poem in poster format and sold it in India to raise funds for the refugees. The price of the poster was “[a]s much as you can willingly part with proceeds to go to rehabilitation of Bangladeshi refugees” (Zecchini 47). The poet himself recited the poem at a poetry recitation program at St. George Church in New York. The legendary pop star Bob Dylan, a close friend of Ginsberg’s, later gave it a musical form. In 1973 the poem was republished in his book *The Fall of America* under the section named “Bixby Canyon to Jessore Road.” The poem was written in thirty eight stanzas, each of which comprised four rhymed lines. In his characteristic style Ginsberg vividly described his personal experience at the refugee camps: the convoy of terrified refugees walking towards Kolkata, the filthy and moribund condition of the camps, weeping mothers with their infants dying of malnutrition and cholera, and the refugees’ crying plea for food:

Millions of babies watching the skies
Bellies swollen, with big round eyes
On Jessore Road—long bamboo huts
No place to shit but sand channel ruts

Millions of fathers in rain
Millions of mothers in pain
Millions of brothers in woe
Millions of sisters nowhere to go

One Million aunts are dying for bread
One Million uncles lamenting the dead
Grandfather millions homeless and sad
Grandmother millions silently mad

Millions of daughters walk in the mud
Millions of children wash in the flood
A Million girls vomit & groan
Millions of families hopeless alone

Millions of souls nineteenseventyone
homeless on Jessore road under grey sun
A million are dead, the million who can
Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan (1-20)

“Millions,” the recurring catchword of the poem with its hyperbolic undertone, strikes a reader with implications, blended with the poet’s memory of the holocaust—the systematic annihilation of about six million Jews at Hitler’s command during the Second World War; to his horror Ginsberg confronts innumerable refugees and their life-in-death suffering, agitating his inner self to relive the trauma of the holocaust. When he was strolling inside the refugee camps, the wretched evacuees of Bangladesh described to the poet not only their miseries but also the massacre and the onslaught of the vindictive Pakistani army from whom they somehow saved their skins, but lost their dear ones. The poet came to know about many such instances that stirred his compassion for those poor souls, inciting his anger, which was harbored against his own country’s idleness during such cataclysm. In the poem, Ginsberg hones his apoplectic attack to the apathy of his own country in such crisis; it is because rather than advancing towards the aid of the refugees, the USA, at that time, was more interested in the Vietnam War. American involvement in the Vietnam War dearly cost the country, affecting lives of a large number of soldiers and their families, and Ginsberg was one of the poets and writers who heavily protested this. Ideologically, as a Beat, he was against all sorts of military action resulting in death and disaster. Therefore, the spatiotemporal image of Moloch in “Howl” returns in this poem in another oppressive form:

Where are the helicopters of U.S. AID?
Smuggling dope in Bangkok’s green shade.
Where is America’s Air Force of Light?
Bombing North Laos all day and all night? (89-92)

In his book *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*, Jonah Raskin notes Ginsberg’s disgust given full vent to the backwash of the Second World War,

especially the atomic explosion in Japan and the consecutive Cold War: "... Ginsberg turned the atom bomb into an all-inclusive metaphor. Everywhere he looked he saw apocalypse and atomization. Everything had been blown up" (Raskin XIV). His attack on America's intrusive disposition to warfare across the globe is apparent in this poem as well. After taking the US authority to task, he poses a series of questions to give them a wake-up call while things are falling apart along the Jessore Road. The poet actually prods the consciousness of his own nation alongside the rest of the world. He urges everyone to play one's role in this moment of crisis by supporting Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi refugees:

Ring O ye tongues of the world for their woe
 Ring out ye voices for Love we don't know
 Ring out ye bells of electrical pain
 Ring in the conscious of America brain (105-108)

Ginsberg does not hesitate to criticize the lavish lifestyle of his fellow Americans when in West Bengal the hungry refugees are yelling in pain, uncertain if they would survive the next day or not. Even the poet does not spare himself from this humanitarian responsibility. He wonders how he may continue his own aspiration and physical demand when humanity in this part of the world groans in such pain:

Is this what I did to myself in the past?
 What shall I do Sunil Poet I asked?
 Move on and leave them without any coins?
 What should I care for the love of my loins?

 What should we care for our cities and cars?
 What shall we buy with our Food Stamps on Mars?
 How many millions sit down in New York
 & sup this night's table on bone & roast pork? (117-124)

Ginsberg's thought on the evilness of capitalism is reiterated here. The postwar frustration of the disparity in American society existed, as he discovered later, almost everywhere he travelled; it made him feel more akin to the downtrodden humanity. In an interview he enlightens his readers with the philosophy of their movement: the Beats "got the bottom-up vision of society" and "saw wealth and power from the point of view of down-and-out people on the street. That's what the Beat Generation was about—being down-and-out, and about having a sense of beatitude, too" (Raskin XIV).

Ginsberg's composition of "Jessore Road" bears on the familiar features of his early poems like "Howl," "Kaddish," "Sunflower Sutra," etc. Like those earlier poems, this one distils the poet's affliction caused by the suffering refugees into meaty resentment. Unlike those poems, "Jessore Road" is written in quatrain, rhyming aabb, which reminds one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. It, in essence, is a lyric poem, and its musical notes are attached in separate pages starting with the tempo "Rubato"—a rhythmic manipulation where a performer stretches as well as compacts certain beats, measures and phrases according to her/

his discretion—commonly used in jazz (britannica.com). Evidently, the poet wanted the poem to be read aloud and to be sung, so that the intensity of passion and emotional vicissitude become more perceptible. Ginsberg acknowledges the influence of Bob Dylan on his poetic composition, because the legendary singer advised him to imitate noticeable song form that ensures “artistic & spiritual transmission” in poetry (XVII). In his apologia of the book on his selected poems, Ginsberg expresses his gratitude both to Dylan and Blake: “September on Jessore Road’ written for Dylan, combines naturalistic detail with Blakean rhymes” (XVIII). His “naturalistic detail” is an imperative propelling the audience into a tortuous visualization of suffering and pain as montaged in various stanzas.

Eminent Bangladeshi poet Nirmalendu Goon, in his book *Ginsberg Er Shonge* (With Ginsberg), records his memories with Ginsberg. To Goon, it was Ginsberg who rose to every crisis of the world, thus making him a poet of universal magnitude, and for that matter, Goon claims that a poem like “Jessore Road” was waiting to be wielded in his nifty hands:

I wonder how an American poet could capture with such a wonderful affection in an indelible classical illustration an ignored purview of our independence. ... When I read the poem I feel, as always, that I am watching the best art film of all time. Even after penetrating twenty years of concealment, in front of me the days of my refugee life becomes alive again. (Our translation; 14)

According to Goon, it was Ginsberg, a true Beat who had his own moral and spiritual firmness to defy the US authority and stand beside the people of Bangladesh. In his writing Goon reproaches Bangladesh as a nation failing to pay tribute to this true friend. Ginsberg died in 1997. However, in 2012, Bangladesh paid homage to seventy five foreign citizens and institutions for their contributions during the war of independence in 1971, and Allen Ginsberg was one of them (*The Daily Star.net*).

After forty four years of the independence of Bangladesh and of the publication of “Jessore Road,” a new generation of readers now read the poem with renewed curiosity and try to comprehend the greatness of an American poet who felt so dearly for their wretched ancestors in the days of 1971. Moreover, a musical rendition of the great poem in Bangla was brought out in 2005 by the famous Bengali singer Moushumi Bhoumik, and her group Parapar, reiterating its enduring plea to the contemporary readers (*My Space.com*). The poem has also been included in the American Poetry courses of several English Department syllabi in Bangladesh. His influence as a precursor of the Beat movement in American literature is undeniable; however, his fame in Bangladesh to a great extent is vested in his sympathy for the Bangladeshi refugees as evinced in “Jessore Road.”

Notes

1. *Krittibas* was in the leading role of the little magazine movement in Kolkata in the 1950s and the 1960s. It brought out poetry by the young and experimental poets, and was first published in 1953 edited by Ananda Bagchi, Dipak Mazumdar and Sunil Gangopadhyay, though, later, Gangopadhyay became the sole editor.
2. John Giorno went to seek guidance from Ginsberg about spiritual resurgence, and the latter

suggested him to go to India and look for it there. Giorno came to India in 1971 and became one of the first Western students of Tibetan Buddhism.

3. Ashok Shahane, in the 1960s, led the little magazine movement in Marathi. Shahane was one of the so-called “starving poets” who were befriended by Ginsberg during the latter’s stay in Bombay in 1961.

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