

A Blue Hand: The Beats In India

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The virtues of *A Blue Hand* are its entertaining variety and flowing dynamic presentations. Its title comes from Allen Ginsberg's Harlem vision in 1948 when he heard an ancient voice reciting Blake and the sky turned into "a living blue hand"(19). One part of Ginsberg's 1960 quest was for an Indian spiritual guru to empower that vision. Ginsberg's complex motivations for his India travels match Baker's elegant biographical skills, first acknowledged with *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Baker's residency in Calcutta, her knowledge of Bengali, her marriage to Amitav Gosh (also a writer), and her connections in India all supply some new sources for Beat Studies scholarship.

In *A Blue Hand*, the American imagination of India is viewed through American writers' published and unpublished journals, letters and interviews. But surviving Indian civil servants, religious figures, politicians and writers also add their interactions with these American pilgrims via their published and unpublished works, letters, and interviews. Through the ethnic and artistic values of these exchanges, Baker shows a wider panorama for the influence of India on the American pilgrims. However, it must be noted that while Baker had access to all the standard primary Beat bibliography for her writers, and access to new primary sources for the Indian side of the story, this isn't fundamentally a work of scholarship. Baker doesn't rely on or quote secondary sources in either field. There is no bibliography of sources, only notes. Consequently, this book won't be used that way much either, perhaps only with respect to the Indian writers.

Baker wears her considerable scholarship lightly and uses it creatively. She rearranges chronology to create a tragicomic, sometimes kaleidoscopic collage that essentially revolves around Ginsberg's life. In concise, elegant, and sometimes dramatic scenes, Ginsberg's compadres including Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder, and Joanne Kyger are deftly sketched, albeit sometimes starkly and tartly. Baker explores sympathetically the diverse and unfamiliar Indian writers, such as Buddhadev Bose, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Jyoti Datta, and Calcutta journalist Asoke Fakir and their specific contacts with Ginsberg and American culture.

To create particularly intense moments out of her character's lives, Baker gives herself the freedom to quote journal entries or letters as dialogue or interior monologues. This lends a live voice inside the commentary, for instance recasting a written dream of Ginsberg into present tense. This fictional technique occasionally jars, when her choice of moments exposes prejudices and class issues. Mostly, however, for such moments her timing and preferences succeed.

Baker's inspired choice for an alternate wanderer to Ginsberg and friends is the obscure Hope Savage. This blue-eyed, highly intelligent "Southern Belle" creates a counter point to Ginsberg's search to confirm and rekindle his blue hand spiritual vision. Even though

Savage's travels are less documented than those of her Beat celebrity friends, her history serves Baker as a template for a Beat acolyte. A young rebel too strange to survive in her hometown of Camden, South Carolina, Hope shared the Beat's "... unspoken fear... [of] a society that locked up its most gifted and troubled"(49). In Greenwich Village, Savage soon recognized that she was not a writer, but, to edge into the hipster pantheon, she cannily taught herself German and recited *their* mystical poets. After serving as Gregory Corso's muse with her intellectual acuity and beauty (and as his mark with her family money), she withdrew when she saw through the hipsters' beatific visions that "... their heroin habits ... narrowed their vistas considerably"(53). From New York she embarked on solo European and Middle Eastern treks. After landing in Iran in spring of 1960 "she saw no chances that her travels would ever bring her back west again ... there was nothing left now to stop her"(65). In 1962, she briefly traveled with Ginsberg, wearing a veil and speaking "perfect Hindi" (185). She never was heard from again.

In contrast to Savage, Baker notes that Ginsberg "[u]nlike many of those who came after him ... neglected to leave much of his past behind. Instead, he bought most of it with him"(7). Ginsberg and Orlovsky habitually imported an inbred atmosphere wherever they landed. Some of this milieu arose from their drug use, some from their socially conflicted and impulsive chaotic lives. Restlessly moving from Bombay to Calcutta to Delhi in his guru quest, an unsatisfied Ginsberg, according to Baker, found himself paradoxically trapped in "his dread of further visionary encounters and the fear of death" (151). At the mid-point, Ginsberg summed up his journey: "the subjective result ... has been to start dropping all the spiritual activity initiated since Blake voice days ... all that mysticism and drugs ... & gurus & fears of hells & desire for god" (138).

One solution was to get out into the streets and daily life. Eventually both Ginsberg and Orlovsky's civic investigations led them through various social classes, and they performed admirably compassionate acts. Orlovsky labored with Sister Theresa in Calcutta and with lepers in Benares. Though deeply conflicted about his motives and the outcomes, Ginsberg nursed dying beggars and arranged for medical help to the extent that some outcasts returned to their families. Much to his credit, such charitable actions became a mainstay for Ginsberg's religious practice throughout his life.

Baker also details how the motley habitués of Calcutta's College Street Coffee house saw Ginsberg and his friends. After listing Ginsberg's charming and/or disturbing peculiarities in their eyes, she writes, "Most disconcerting of all, Allen Ginsberg ... overlook[ed] all they'd been schooled to find backward—their poverty above all ... Finally, despite themselves, they ... indulge[d] Allen's interest in Hindu philosophy, a subject they, as militant rationalists, had no earthly use for" (161-62).

The results of each pilgrim's journey sometimes work in inverse proportion to their self-absorption and talents for personal revelation. Baker hypothesizes that Hope Savage reached "the point of no turning back" (209). That concept Baker also applies to Ginsberg's quest. Ginsberg recognized that his spiritual hubris and accidie fed on his Harlem vision of Blake, creating an unhealthy obsession that his visionary powers were proof of a wise immortality. His agony was that further wisdom and visions didn't show up while his body

aged painfully. In a long dramatic burst, his poem “The Change—*Kyoto-Tokyo Express*” documents how Ginsberg gained from many Indian sources insight and self-acceptance. That accumulation pushed him past his point of no return: “In my train seat I renounce / my power, so that I do / live I will die” (328, *Collected Poems 1940-1980*). For others, such as Snyder, their Indian experiences steadily worked on their lives and spiritual traditions and became integral to their writing practices. Immigration of India’s various writers and intellectuals, many of whom use English for their works, has flourished into the 21st century. Baker’s comment on Ginsberg obtains for all: they would “bring India” (209) home to America each in their own ways.