

# From East to West: A Trans-cultural Journey of the 1960s in Spirituality and Music

## Abstract

By studying the sociopolitical scenario and the counterculture of 1960s, this paper attempts to explore when and how eastern culture and philosophy began to be associated with psychedelics. The first section of the paper traces the relevance of eastern spiritual philosophy in the counterculture of the 1960s and the decade preceding it. It will then study the impact of eastern culture on the popular culture of the west by referring to one of the most influential bands, the Beatles. The question raised here are if and how the music of the band, the Beatles, popularised the psychedelics and the eastern idea of spirituality as perceived by the west. The last section offers a conclusion to the arguments raised in this paper.

**Keywords:** Counterculture of 1960s, Hippie movement, Psychedelics, the Beatles, Popular Culture and Music, Eastern Spirituality, Orientalism.

## Introduction

"People today are still living off the table scraps of the sixties. They are still being passed around- the music and the ideas."

-Bob Dylan

The mid-twentieth century was a highly influential time and a part of the reason for this was the counterculture of the 1960s (hippie movement). It was a decade of social unrest and change. Anti-war protests had become common (due to Vietnam War) and the young generation, in general, felt highly dissatisfied with the materialistic values that had begun to rule the society. Experimentation and liberation being the driving force of the hippie movement, led people to rely on psychedelic drugs and search for alternate spiritual practices. This was also the time when British rock band, the Beatles, dominated the popular culture and was involved in its own kind of trans-cultural journey in both musical and spiritual sense. However, amidst this ongoing trans-cultural journey, when and how did eastern culture and philosophy begin to be associated with psychedelics? To be able to answer this, the paper begins by tracing the relevance of eastern spiritual philosophy in the counterculture of the 1960s and the decade preceding it. It will then study the impact of eastern culture on the popular culture of the west by referring to one of the most influential bands, The Beatles. The last section offers a conclusion to the arguments raised in this paper.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to analyse the relationship between popular culture and ethnicity by examining the case of the Beatles and the influence of eastern spirituality on their music and the image of the East created thereby. This study will help in establishing a clearer perspective on the roots of the popular image of the Eastern spiritual philosophies constructed in the West and its imprint on the western music.

## Review of Literature

The history and the rise of hippie movement have been elaborately discussed by John Robert Howard in "The Flowering of the Hippie Movement" (1969). The article encompasses the defining characteristics of the movement, the four different kinds of hippies who had taken over the scene and their ideologies. Jessica Corry in her article "The Beatles and the Counterculture" (2010) discusses the famous British band as the symbol of transformation and a metaphor for the movement of the 1960s. Both David R. Reck in the essay "Beatles Orientalis: Influences from Asia in a Popular Song Tradition" (1985) and Trent Cunningham in his



**Ankita Singh**

Assistant Professor,  
School of English  
Fairfield Institute of Management  
and Technology,  
New Delhi, India

work "Psychedelic Orientalism: Representations of India in the Music of the Beatles" (2011) interpret the music of 1960s through the lens of Orientalism. Brian Ireland and Sharif Gemie in "Raga Rock: Popular Music and the Turn to the East in the 1960s" (2017) discuss the interaction between Western and Indian music along with the literal as well as virtual journeys undertaken to the East in 1960-70s.

#### Discussion

During the 1950s, the society was still mentally recuperating from the effects of the Second World War. Even though there was an economic boom towards the end of the decade that led to prosperity, there was a small set of people who found the increasing consumerism, materialism and rigid opinions suffocating. These people were mainly writers and poets like Kerouac and Ginsberg who, through their writings, displayed anti-conformist attitude and leanings towards eastern spiritual philosophies. But the Beat Generation literary movement never gained as much popularity as the hippie movement of the 1960s since the former was limited to elite-literary scholars. Nevertheless, it was mainly from their ideals that the counterculture of the succeeding decade took inspiration.

With J.F. Kennedy's assassination, America's increasing involvement in Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Civil Rights Movement, the 1960s came to be known for the great socio-political unrest and change. Anti-war demonstrations and activism, in general, became more and more prominent with people demanding peace, love and freedom. As much as the 1960s are remembered as years of chaos, uncertainty and high activism, they are equally remembered: "as a time of great vigor, excitement, optimism, innocence, fun and creativity" (Reck 90). All these characteristics were reflected in the popular music of that time. Experimenting and exploring new things became a way for the people to liberate themselves from the establishment. This experimentation became evident in the music too, which came to be seen as a medium to guide people in their quest for peace and spirituality. The hippie movement saw music not only as a source of entertainment but also as a means to express their political and spiritual views.

By the mid-twentieth century, the people had begun to seek their alternate world-views and lifestyle inspiration in the eastern religions especially Zen Buddhism and to a lesser extent in Chinese, Tibetan and Hindu philosophy. The counterculture was as much about religious and moral nonconformity as it was about social nonconformity. Feeling tied down by a rigid religious and spiritual framework, the young generation wanted the freedom to personal expression. The desperate need to somehow get in touch with the divine and the yearning for direct experience of the universe inclined them to the "mystical" practices of the eastern religions. Around the same time, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, two professors at Harvard were conducting a research on experiments with psychedelic drugs and "claimed that their research had shown hallucinogenic experiences

under LSD and other drugs paralleling certain Tibetan Buddhist religious experiences attained through chanting, ritual, and meditation: enhanced consciousness, inner perceptions of a deeper reality, visions of light and colour (even of specific deities or mythological happenings)...[and] Nirvana" (Reck 91). The duo along with Ralph Metzner then published a book titled *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964) which had a great influence on John Lennon and George Harrison from the band, The Beatles. With the publishing of books such as these, the use of drugs to reach the higher consciousness not only became an important characteristic of the hippie movement but also reinstated the stereotypical views of the mystical eastern religions and culture. Drugs became popular despite being condemned as an illegitimate path to enlightenment by some eminent Indian personalities in the West such as Swami Prabhavananda.

At this point, I would like to argue that *The Psychedelic Experience* proved to be the genesis of eastern culture and music getting lost in psychedelia in the hands of Leary and The Beatles respectively. By using *Bardo Thodol* or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as the reference point to guide his readers through an acid trip, Leary ended up legitimising drugs as a tool to achieve the ultimate enlightenment that the eastern philosophy preaches. As a result, it brought down the deeply intellectual and complex tenets of eastern spirituality to the level of something that could be achieved easily through LSD. Since liberating of mind (considered to be the true meaning of eastern spirituality) was made accessible to everyone through an acid trip, it appealed to the hippies whose one of the primary goals was to break free from the establishment and the bourgeois society. They found in drugs the shortcut to what would have otherwise meant years and years of discipline and spiritual training. Gradually, a subculture developed that extolled the LSD-induced mystical and religious symbolism and endorsed the use of drugs for raising consciousness.

This link between psychedelic drugs and Eastern spiritual philosophy travelled from literary-scholarly realm to the popular culture through the Beatles who, when experimenting with psychedelics, began to fuse Indian music into their songs. Jonathan Bellman acknowledges that a "...clear connection developed between cultural and musical worlds. The main publicists for Indian culture (however imperfectly understood) were the Beatles" (125). The music scene of the sixties was changing and in many ways complemented the psychedelic characteristic of the counterculture. The genre of rock 'n' roll was making its way into a more experimenting genre of rock-psychedelic as well as raga rock. The Beatles were in a sense the pioneers of this change. They got introduced to the music of Sitar maestro, Ravi Shankar, in the summer of 1965 when Harrison and Lennon were on their second acid trip and a recording of Hindustani classical music was playing on the stereo. Another instance when the band came in close contact with the Indian culture and music was

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on the sets of the movie *Help!* (1965). The plot revolves around people of an eastern cult who are after Ringo Starr (who is in possession of a ring held sacred by the cult), prepared to offer him as a human sacrifice to their goddess "Kaeli" (a corrupted version of goddess Kali) and attempt to hypnotise Starr with the help of Indian music. An important scene from the movie which holds relevance in this paper is that of an Indian restaurant where a ridiculously stereotypical oriental view is depicted. The only reason as to why the movie can be perhaps excused from a heavy censure is that it was not a documentary but a parody of a kind. Nevertheless, it is still crucial to highlight as Trent Cunningham points out with reference to this movie that the west still had control over the means of representation by portraying "the Orient in any terms it found useful, for escape or vicarious living or simple comic effect" (14). Another significance that this scene holds is that during its shooting, a sitar caught Harrison's eye and this was to be the beginning of his interest in Indian music, especially in sitar.

The song "Norwegian Wood" from the album *Rubber Soul* (1965) was The Beatles' beginning of their trans-cultural journey. It was the first song of its kind in popular music to feature an Indian instrument, sitar. By then, The Beatles were already a huge sensation not only in Britain but also in America. Their music, actions and words were being followed by the fans and recorded by the media. This put a lot of restrictions and pressure on them and was perhaps one of the reasons that inclined them to experiment with psychedelic drugs (in order to escape "Beatlemania" for a while). Their first conscious intake of LSD proved to be so intense that deep, philosophical awakening was engendered by the drug which "possessed an undeniable power- a spiritual power- that forced them [Lennon and Harrison] to look inside themselves" (Spitz 566). Therefore, the featuring of sitar in "Norwegian Wood" although superficial, was at that point still crucial because in popular culture it invoked India as a landscape of mysticism and never heard before musical sounds.

In 1966, the band released the song, "Tomorrow Never Knows", which established a more direct link with psychedelic drugs and eastern spirituality. The lyrics, "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream/ it is not dying... lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void" imitate the guiding passages from *The Psychedelic Experience*. Later, Leary in his autobiography, *Flashbacks* described the book as an attempt to translate "the Book of the Dead from Anglo-Buddhist to American psychedelia" (140). With this song, the image of the East (specifically India) was now engrained in the popular culture as a "land of trippy gurus holding secret, ancient, psychedelic wisdom that could liberate the young hippie from the system of stuffy, bourgeois Western values" (Cunningham 1). The effect thus produced was such that people till date believe that the song "...simultaneously draws attention to mind-altering drugs and the ancient religious philosophies of the Orient" (Macdonald 190).

Harrison's later song "Within You Without You" (1967) was yet another attempt to absorb the influx of eastern cultural and musical influence on western culture. But unlike "Norwegian Wood", this fusion was very mature and complex. It was a resultant of Harrison's six weeks' tutelage under Ravi Shankar in the summer of 1966 which made him see India and its culture beyond the perspective of psychedelia. Harrison's visit that was still primarily an escape to the East for spiritual renewal got combined with Shankar's vision of India. The consequence of this venerated vision of Shankar's can be seen in the lyrics of "Within You Without You" which follow "a passionate conversation with a friend about the ills of Western society and the alternatives Indian spirituality offered" (Cunningham 48). However, by the end of the decade, the psychedelic vision of eastern landscape spiritual philosophy was deeply engraved in the popular culture that there was no chance this one song could alone separate psychedelia from eastern culture. Therefore, it would not be incorrect to conclude that the trans-cultural perspective during the 1960s was very much still a biased influence which was loaded with the pre-existing Orientalist structure of thought. "The westerners wanted something markedly different, an Indian alterity, but it had to be similar enough to speak the same familiar psychedelic language" (Cunningham 55) and this is what led to a distorted understanding of the Eastern culture in terms of spirituality and music.

## Conclusion

This paper examines transculturalism of the 1960s placed within the socio-political context. It establishes two main arguments. The first argument is that even though the 1960s are referred to as the times of great intercultural influences that led to overflow of creativity in the fields of art and music but the influence that eastern nations like India had on the west was still restricted to the Orientalist structure of thought and was thus, very much biased. My second argument is that how an American research on psychedelics and the music of a British band with counterculture of the 1960s in the backdrop, coloured people's view of the eastern culture in terms of spirituality and music. *The Psychedelic Experience* proved to be the genesis of eastern culture and music getting lost in psychedelia at the hands of Timothy Leary and The Beatles respectively. While the book linked eastern culture with drugs, the Beatles inspired by the book took it a step further by using Indian music in their songs to establish what Leary did through the Tibetan Buddhist text. With this, the eastern culture, music and psychedelic drugs got so entangled with each other that from thereon one did not seem to exist without the other two.

Moreover, the new-age movement – "a late-twentieth-century movement associated with Western and Eastern spiritual philosophies that is inclusive of all religions and cultures and borrows from the ideas of self-help and self-transformation as well as the arena of metaphysics" (Dave 85) – which has its roots in the 1960s counterculture, has had nothing "new" to offer because as it has been argued in this paper, the

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oriental image of India as a land of trippy gurus and fountainhead of psychedelic wisdom prevailed all through the late twentieth century. In contemporary times, referring to Goa Gil's<sup>1</sup> fusion music which claims to help people reach their higher consciousness while dancing on the trance music can be seen as an extension of the treatment that the eastern culture and spirituality received at the hands of the west in the past.

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## Footnotes

1. *He is an artist as well as a saint who dedicated his life to "raise awareness through music". "It is in that quest, between the 70s and the 90s, that he and his companions shaped the spirit of the modern rave in the continuity of the hippy movements", as quoted on <http://en.traxmag.com/interview/35362-go-gil-the-unbelievable-story-of-trance-music-s-spiritual-father>.*