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JOSNA PANKHANIA & JACQUELINE HARGREAVES

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JOSNA PANKHANIA
& JACQUELINE HARGREAVES

CULTURE OF SILENCE: SATYANANDA YOGA

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recently investigated the period in the 1970s and 1980s when shocking levels of abuse were deeply entrenched in the Satyananda Yoga ashram at Mangrove Mountain (Australia). Case Study 21 of the Royal Commission provided a critical cultural analysis of the practices and values held by Satyananda Yoga that served to foster, as well as mask, the abuse. The Commission concluded that Swami Satyananda Saraswati (b. 1923, d. 2009), the founding guru, had overarching authority at the Mangrove Mountain ashram (and its centres) in his role as head of Satyananda Yoga worldwide.

The Mangrove Mountain ashram, renamed the Academy of Yoga Science, has recently engaged in a reparation process, which reached a 'Settlement Agreement' that has resulted in the payment of compensation to the survivors of child sexual abuse at this ashram. However, multiple philosophical, ideological and pedagogical matters, which were highlighted by the Royal Commission as systemic at an institutional level, remain unresolved. The current head of Satyananda Yoga, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (b. 1960), has yet to engage in the evaluation of practices that were deemed problematic and unsafe. This article aims to highlight the potential risks that remain within the Satyananda Yoga institution as a result of this leadership silence.

THE GURU AND DEVOTION

The guru-disciple pedagogy, which is inherent in many schools of yoga in India, has proven to be a vulnerable juncture in the transmission of transnational yoga. Although there are many individual gurus that have made formative contributions to the practice of contemporary yoga worldwide, few organisations that support such a teaching model have managed to navigate the power dynamics without scandal and abuse.

The word *guru* is a widely used honorific title within Indian religious traditions that generally refers to a master or an accomplished teacher. As the name *guru* is given to those considered accomplished, the nature of the guru's knowledge is often worshipped as divine. The many kinds of guru "differ according to the rites or scriptures in which they are experts, and then indicate the characteristics, qualities and abilities that they must possess" (Brunner, Oberhammer & Padoux 2004, 192).

Within Satyananda Yoga, the guru–disciple relationship is established through a formal initiation (*dīkṣā).* The initiation process described by the Sanskrit term *dīkṣā*, became a defining feature of early tantric Śaivism as a transformative liberation rite that took the form of ritual (most often through mantras), where an initiate realises his innate state of omniscience through the grace of the guru (eds. Goodall & Rastelli 2013, 169). However, within contemporary guru lineages, such as Satyananada Yoga, *dīkṣā* is widely regarded as a qualificatory rite for a renunciate lifestyle, particularly amongst those who embrace *bhakti* (devotion) as a means of liberation.

Initiates who accept complete renunciation (*pūrṇasannyāsa*) in the Satyananda order, receive an initiatory name (*dīkṣānāman*) of *saraswatī*, which denotes their spiritual lineage, and also adopt the title *swāmī*, 'master of the self' (Persson 2000). Many *pūrṇasannyāsins* officially change their registered family name to 'Saraswati'.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was one of the first gurus to initiate both men and women of the West as *sannyāsins* in the late 19th century (Ellwood 1987). The initiation of Westerners became widespread in the 1960s and 1970s when various Indian teachers—such as Swami Satyananda, Swami Vishnudevananda and Swami Chidananda, all disciples of Swami Sivananda—began to travel internationally and attract relatively large numbers of followers (Saraswati, Y. 1995).

Within his evolving *paramparā* (lineage), Satyananda developed the concept of *karmasannyāsa*, which denotes a renunciate with householder duties (Saraswati, Y. 1995). This enabled both Eastern and Western 'householders', many of whom were women, who had worldly obligations to fulfil, to pursue a spiritual path without renouncing family life. These *karmasannyāsins* received the title of *sannyāsi*, rather than that of *swāmī.* Only those who were deemed suited for a life devoted exclusively to spiritual pursuits were initiated to the higher order of *pūrṇasannyāsa*.

As the rate of initiation to the Satyananda Yoga order grew in parallel with its transnational expansion in the late 20th century, it became impractical for the guru to offer *dīkṣā* ceremonies individually. As a result, rather than an intimate ceremonial ritual that involved the guru whispering the initiatory mantra in the ear of an initiate (and the initiate performing a circumambulation of the guru and prostration at his feet), the process evolved and it became possible for *dīkṣā* to be taken en masse with up to one hundred or more individuals initiated at a time (Pankhania 2008). This type of mass initiation took place in various countries when the guru was visiting and continues to be offered in India today. There are also a few cases whereby the guru sent a personal mantra in an envelope by post across the world for initiation (Pankhania 2008).

The Royal Commission heard that the commitment of Satyananda Yoga disciples to their guru was often described in terms of surrender, submission, obedience and devotion (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 11). It was clearly recorded in evidence that "the devotion to the

guru–disciple relationship that was required in the practice of Satyananda Yoga at the Mangrove ashram ultimately culminated in a complete and unquestioning trust by both adults and children alike" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 54). The report goes on to explain that initiation at a young age into a belief system which requires a person to devote themselves to a guru and give up their name, personal property and connection with mainstream community results in a loss of identity and, at the same time, creates a sense of belonging (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 53).

Satyananda Yoga's complex doctrine and initiation pathways focus on the individual's personal development through their ability to offer devotion and service to the guru. At the same time, the initiate is expected to seek guidance from the guru when attempting to cultivate higher discernment. The guru is honoured as one who has the ability to lift an aspirant's veil of ignorance and is "the force which leads [...] to enlightenment" (Saraswati, S. N. 1987-89). With such a strong emphasis on spiritual development, how does the Satyananda Yoga community make sense of the testimonies of the survivors of child sexual abuse and the conclusions of the Royal Commission?

MAKING SENSE OF THE ABUSE

Little guidance or leadership has been forthcoming from the international head of Satyananda Yoga, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, in relation to the censorious conclusions of the Royal Commission and the incidents at Mangrove Mountain ashram. Disciples at Mangrove Mountain wrote to the principal institution in India (the Bihar School of Yoga) regarding the alleged abuse by Swami Akhandananda (head of Mangrove Mountain ashram at the time of the abuse). Their letter was met with a simple acknowledgment of receipt.[1] No support was offered nor any redress for the victims.[2]

The Royal Commission concluded that "when those responsible for management of the Bihar School of Yoga first heard about the Royal Commission's investigation of the sexual abuse of children by Akhandananda, their primary concern was to minimise the risk of damaging the reputation of Satyananda yoga." (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 86). The initial response was to distance the Bihar School of Yoga from its association with Australian institutions, including the removal of support for the use of the name 'Satyananda' and the renouncing of all of its ties. However, after the close of evidence, the Bihar School of Yoga revised its position and acknowledged support for the work of the Royal Commission. It was noted that the Bihar School "restricted its statement and subsequent closing submission to reference allegations made against Akhandananda and Shishy [(second in charge at the ashram)] and did not refer to alleged conduct of Satyananda" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 86).

In an environment where the leaders of this institution portray the founder, Satyananda, as a god and where special prayers are offered to commemorate his merging with *Brahman* (the absolute) at death, it is near impossible for disciples to consider any testimony of sexual abuse

against him posthumously. As such, cognitive dissonance is well entrenched within the culture of this institution.

Without proper leadership, teachers and senior swamis of Satyananda Yoga worldwide have been left to their own devices to traverse the difficult, and often complex, path forward. Personal loyalties, allegiances and commitment to branch institutions have been influential factors in forging an individual's response. In some cases, decades of a disciple's life as well as significant portions of their personal wealth have been offered to the guru and the institution. As such, there is deep personal investment in ensuring the survival of the institution. For indeed, how can one's objectivity be maintained when one has surrendered both one's name and identity?

THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

Internationally, the resounding message within Satyananda Yoga is that the entire organisation now has effective child protection policies in place and that vulnerable groups are protected. The Royal Commission acknowledged that Mangrove Mountain has implemented policies and procedures for child protection as well as a 'Grievance Policy' (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 73). However, the Commission also heard that there are "deficiencies around training and implementation of child protection policies" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 75). The hearing accepted "that the ashram is in the process of improving its training for both senior staff and the broader ashram community." However, these measures have not necessarily been implemented in Satyananda Yoga centres around the world.

Hetty Johnston, the Executive Chair of Bravehearts Foundation (Australia's leading organisation working in the field of child sexual assault prevention, which has been assisting the Royal Commission) explains that:

> [W]e have seen internationally, within many religious institutions, most publicly the Catholic and Anglican churches, [that] the presence of 'policies' and 'protocols' are ineffective if the organisational culture is one of denial and protection of those within.[3]

She continues by explaining that:

> When organisations are not acting in a transparent manner, when decision making and complaint processes are closed and not open to scrutiny, we have seen nothing but failures in their responses to victims of child sexual assault. Organisations that are not openly transparent both attract individuals who are willing to harm children and young people, and make any child or young person that comes into contact with them vulnerable to harm and a lifetime of damage.

In this letter sent by Johnston to the British Wheel of Yoga, she stated that:

> [Bravehearts] share concerns that the pervading culture within SY [Satyananda Yoga] is not one of transparency and accountability in relation to child protection issues within the organisation.

The above letter by Johnston prompted the British Wheel of Yoga to suspend their current endorsement of the Satyananda Yoga lineage within the United Kingdom until further action is taken by its leaders.[4]

At one of the hearings of the Royal Commission, a senior swami recalls suggesting that "[...] the girls were very provocative" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 37). The response from the Commission was that this swami did not appear to understand that, as a person with seniority and authority, she was implicitly condoning Akhandananda's actions by suggesting that he, in effect, had "succumbed to the temptation of flirting girls" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 37). The Commission concluded that this swami's response was inappropriate and evidenced an apparent lack of understanding of how to respond to allegations of child sexual abuse (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 38). This lack of understanding and ability to respond appropriately is still apparent in the marketing and communication material of Satyananda Yoga institutions, such as the Rocklyn Yoga Ashram (Victoria, Australia), which states:

> During the 1980s there was a hierarchical leadership structure controlled by Swami Akhandananda resulting in mismanagement in disseminating the traditional values and wisdom of yoga. It wasn't just that he abused his position of power, and the children in his care, it was that he took unbridled authority and demanded total trust. This allowed the establishment of a culture contrary to the principles and purpose of yoga.
>
> Subsequently, in the 1990s, Satyananda Yoga in Australia underwent a complete restructuring to remove the remnants of a culture that did not realize or achieve its highest potential. Such authoritarian teachers no longer exist in Australia.
>
> In the last twenty (20) years, yoga teachers and sannyasins have worked collaboratively together on taking responsibility and shared authority in decision making, setting rigorous standards including teacher training and ethics, and in establishing training programs to meet standards.[5]

By focusing purely on the abuse perpetrated by Akhandananda, the statement attempts to limit the extent of the findings to a single individual. No mention is made of the Royal Commission's conclusion that Satyananda had overarching authority; no mention is made of the cultural and systemic issues identified that enabled abuse to occur; and the testimonies against others within Satyananda Yoga, who were accused of abuse, have been ignored.

The testimonies of the victims allege a history of abuse at ashrams both in Australia and India over a sustained period of time. The abuse occurred while the guru and the ashram promoted

celibacy and taught the strict ethical principles of yoga. The Royal Commission heard from one disciple that soon after her 17th birthday, Satyananda engaged in sexual relations with her on a regular basis for six years until 1982 (Australia, Royal Commission 2014b, 11) and that it was "often aggressive, violent sex" (Australia, Royal Commission 2014c, 20). Furthermore, the Commission heard that Satyananda's successor commenced a sexual relationship with this same disciple, which lasted until she returned to Australia in 1984 (Australia, Royal Commission 2014d, 110-111). The Commission also heard from another disciple that Satyananda had sex with her in both Australia and India. In her statement, she recalls that she was made to drink Satyananda's urine as a 'traditional yogic' form of contraception (Australia, Royal Commission 2014e, 19-20).

In the submission by the Bihar School of Yoga to the Royal Commission, these serious allegations against Satyananda were deemed "out of scope" and "untested" (Bihar School of Yoga 2014, Subm.1021:006:0007, 17a-d). The Bihar School submission states that these victim's claims "are allegations raised after the death of Satyananda and therefore [the school was] unable to answer them appropriately" (Bihar School of Yoga 2014, Subm.1021:006:0007, 17b).

Satyananda framed his system of Yoga around the ethical and moral precepts (*yamas* and *niyamas*) of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*. This system includes the principles of *ahiṃsā* (defined by Satyananda as 'non-violence in attitude and action') and *satya* ('truthfulness') (Satyananda 1976). How is it then possible for disciples of Satyananda Yoga to reconcile the behaviour of their guru with these moral precepts? On the one hand, he is seen as a~~n omnipotent,~~ celibate~~,~~ and ethical being and, on the other, he is an accused sex offender. Faced with this psychologically challenging dilemma, many initiates have acted to devalue the testimonies of survivors.[6] The loyal disciples, who consider their guru to be spiritually enlightened, dismiss the survivors' testimonies in ways that attack the character of the victim and then reframe the narrative to support the innocence and purity of the guru. This newly constructed narrative reduces the personal stress caused by the cognitive dissonance. As Festinger (1957) wrote, "[i]f more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must after all be correct."

As an initiated Satyananda Yoga teacher and member of an online Satyananda Yoga teachers' closed Facebook group, one of the authors (JP) of this article has attempted to openly discuss the ethical, moral, philosophical and pedagogical implications of Case Study 21. Instead of engaging with the issues, the Satyananda Yoga teachers and administrators have engaged in *argumentum ad hominem*. The teachers have refused to discuss the power dynamics within the guru–disciple relationship and the implications this has on their role as teachers of yoga in the broader community. By silencing the voice of dissent and focusing only on the positive aspects of Satyananda Yoga, this community is creating an alternative narrative to the findings of the Royal Commission. The cultural and philosophical dynamics that allowed the abuse remain unchallenged and, as such, the allegations against those who perpetrated abuse have been ignored.

VULNERABLE STILL AT RISK

On the 25th January 2017, within nine months of the report issued by the Royal Commission, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati was awarded the *Padma Bhushan*, the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India, for his distinguished service to the country.[7] The award was issued on the Republic Day of India by the President, Pranab Mukherjee with the approval of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.[8] The timing of this award strongly suggests that the Indian government has attempted to exonerate the Bihar School of Yoga and maintain the integrity of its reputation in good light. Now, as a celebrated leader and contributor to contemporary yoga education both within India and internationally, how will Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati use this honoured position to overcome the systemic issues that have plagued Satyananda Yoga?

To date, the Indian leaders of the Satyananda Yoga have continued to plead ignorance of the extent and serious nature of the abuse. Their refusal to accept responsibility shows contempt for those concerned and affected, whether as a primary victim or as a devoted disciple. Justin Whitaker of the organisation called An Olive Branch, which seeks to mediate conflict resolution and assist those affected by abuse in Buddhist communities (*sanghas*), writes:

> When abuse does happen, it is up to the community to move forward in a healthy manner, which includes ensuring that all concerns are heard and addressed, that the removal of the teacher is considered, and that means of amends are discussed. Additionally, issues of secrecy should be discussed, education on the misuse of power provided, along with support and training for new leaders (Whitaker 2017).

Rev. Kyoki Roberts, who is in the same organisation, contends that:

> Prevention is the best medicine and should include board and clergy training. Every board must establish and adhere to an ethics statement and grievance procedure. If you are a board member, you have a fiduciary responsibility to protect all who come to your center! Do not wait! (Whitaker 2017).

Following the recent 'Settlement Agreement' reached between the survivors and the Academy of Yoga Science ('Satyananda Yoga'), a statement from the Director addressed to Satyananda Yoga teachers (in Australia) was published stating that:

> We are pleased to be able to close the chapter on a particularly difficult period in the history of our organisation.[9]

An elected member of the ethics committee for the Satyananda Yoga Teachers' Association Inc. (SYTA), the professional association of yoga teachers, responded by stating that SYTA is an entirely separate organisation from both the Yoga Academy (i.e., the Academy of Yoga Science) and Satyananda Ashram, and that it believes:

> [I]t is not appropriate for SYTA to become involved in these things [i.e., matters related to the Royal Commission].[10]

While the culture of silence and denial prevails at the highest level of the Satyananda Yoga community and the problem of cognitive dissonance persists, significant questions about the psychological safety of people within this yoga movement must be raised. Many survivors (primary victims) have expressed that they continue to experience complex trauma as a result of the way in which the community leaders have responded to the outcomes of the Royal Commission. Also, secondary victims remain at risk within an unreformed institution. Secondary victims are those who are experiencing vicarious trauma or sense of betrayal as a result of witnessing their guru's neglect of his 'sacred duty' towards the most vulnerable in his lineage.

Satyananda Yoga is an international yoga movement and its leaders have a mandate to take yoga from "shore to shore and from door to door" (Australia, Royal Commission 2014a, 3). Until each of the risks are systematically addressed through a worldwide restructuring of Satyananda Yoga, both in its values and its practices, the institution must be viewed as unfit to protect those exposed to its teaching and culture.

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NOTES

[1] The contents of this letter was read at a community consultation held at the Mangrove Mountain ashram on 21 November, 2015. This event was facilitated by Terry O'Connell, Director of Real Justice Australia and attended by one of the authors (JP).

[2] This statement was communicated to Satyananda Yoga teachers (affiliates of the Academy of Yoga Science, Australia) via an email from the Director of Education, Satyananda Yoga Academy, dated 16 November, 2016. It was also noted by the Royal Commission that "there was no evidence of any expression of support by the Bihar School for the survivors of sexual abuse prior to the public hearing" (Australia, Royal Commission 2016, 86).

[3] The following three citations are taken from a formal letter of correspondence between Hetty Johnston, Executive Chair of Bravehearts Foundation and Rebecca Morris of the British Wheel of Yoga. (Letter dated 19 June, 2017.)

[4] In email correspondence with one of the authors (JP) of this article, Rebecca Morris, Safeguarding and Diversity Manager of the British Wheel of Yoga, stated that: "We have made the decision that we will no longer accredit Satyananda Yoga UK and they have now been placed in the suspended category." (Email dated 17 July, 2017.)

[5] Rocklyn Yoga Ashram, Victoria. "Rocklyn Ashram: Explores the Past & What the Future Holds." Retrieved from: https://www.yogavic.org.au/extras/rocklyn-ashram-explores-the-past---what-the-future-holds. Accessed on: 25 October, 2017.

[6] The survivors, who's testimonies have been devalued and challenged, have chosen to make public their ongoing trauma through the Facebook group: "Satyananda Yoga – Reveal the Truth: Shining a Light on sexual abuse in Satyananda Ashrams." Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/groups/sy.reavealthetruth/. Accessed on: 25 October, 2017.

[7] The official award listing is published by the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs (Public Section). *Padma Awards Directory (1954-2017)*. Retrieved from: http://mha.nic.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/Year_Wise_main_25042017.pdf. Accessed on: 26 October 2017.

[8] The *President's Secretariat Notification* (No. 42-Pres/2017) was issued in New Delhi on the 30 March, 2017. Retrieved from: http://www.padmaawards.gov.in/Padma2017.aspx. Accessed on: 26 October 2017.

[9] In written communication from the Director, Academy of Yoga Science addressed to Satyananda Yoga teachers (affiliates of Academy of Yoga Science, Australia), dated 13 October 2017.

[10] Retrieved from personal correspondence between Sanatan Saraswati and the Dayasagar Saraswati (Ethics Committee Member, SYTA) published on the Facebook group: "Satyananda Yoga – Reveal the Truth: Shining a Light on sexual abuse in Satyananda Ashrams." Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/groups/sy.reavealthetruth/. Accessed on: 21 October, 2017 at 09:21.

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