



Project

SATYA

INVESTIGATION
INTERIM REPORT #1

MEMORANDUM

to: Project SATYA Admins
(Angela Gollat, Antonia Abu Matar, Jens Augspurger)

from: Carol Merchasin; Dr. Josna Pankhania

subject: Interim Report on the investigation into the sexual abuse claims against Swami Mahadevananda, and statements of survivors on sexual, psychological and other forms of abuse

date: June 2020

TRIGGER WARNING

This report discusses several forms of abuse, including sexual abuse in graphic language, emotional abuse and negligence.

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Project SATYA Overview

Background of Project Satya

On December 10, 2019, Julie Salter, who had been a close disciple of Swami Vishnudevananda, the leader of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (“ISYVC”) until his death in 1993, published a Facebook post with an account of the sexual misconduct of Swami Vishnudevananda. The swamis of the Sivananda tradition are required to be celibate.

Ms. Salter also described her subsequent efforts to bring this information to the Executive Board Membership (“EBM”) in 2007.

A community group called *Project SATYA* was immediately created, led by Angela Gollat, Antonia Abu Matar and Jens Augspurger (“the Project Satya Admins”) to shed light on this and other claims of sexual and psychological harm in the ISYVC. The Project Satya Admins set up a Facebook group (“Project Satya Facebook Community”) and additional women immediately began writing Facebook posts about sexual misconduct involving Swami Vishnudevananda, Prahlada, Swami Mahadevananda and others. Allegations of other forms of abuse (emotional, financial, callous indifference, and indentured servitude) also began to come forward.

The History of the EBM’s Investigation

In December 2019, the EBM issued a statement through its Public Relations firm, *Communications Avenue*, that a confidential email box had been set up by the firm and that women who had allegations could reach out to this email address confidentially.

The EBM attempted to reassure skeptical women to come forward by asserting that no one who told their story would be sued. The Project Satya Facebook Community viewed this statement as an admission of the silencing of women in the past. (Ms. Salter had been threatened with legal action, and other women allege that they had also been intimidated.)

In a further erosion of trust, the EBM first appeared to express surprise at Ms. Salter’s claims, but a statement made a week later admitted that they were aware of Ms. Salter’s claims beginning in 2007 and that they had failed to investigate.

Given the inadequate and contradictory responses from the organisation, Project SATYA decided that an independent community-led investigation would better serve bringing truth forward and letting survivors voices be heard.

In January 2020, the EBM announced that they had hired Marianne Plamondon, a Quebec lawyer with considerable experience as an independent investigator. Her investigation was initially limited to allegations against Swami Vishnudevananda. Subsequently, the EBM expanded the mandate of Mme. Plamondon's investigation to include allegations of sexual misconduct against Prahlada (aka Thamam Reddy).

However, not all of the women who came forward to Mme. Plamondon with allegations against Prahlada were included in her investigation. Instead, on April 10, 2020 Mme Plamondon stated that the EBM had limited her investigation to only four women. This seems to contradict the EBM commitment in early 2020 that "Ms. Plamondon will have the independence to meet with anyone she believes would help in her findings, and we will not interfere in any way during her investigation."

Further, at the end of March 2020, only hours before the first survivor of alleged abuse by Swami Vishnudevananda (Kuttan Nair) was scheduled to testify to Mme. Plamondon, the EBM suspended its investigation into all abuses by Vishnudevananda, citing COVID-19 as the cause.

Part 1:
**Summary of Conclusions of the Investigation into Sexual
Misconduct by Swami Mahadevananda (Maurizio Finocchi)**

Carol Merchasin

Overview

I was retained by Project SATYA to investigate sexual misconduct allegations within the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (ISYVC) in February 2020. Dr. Josna Pankhania was retained at the same time to survey different forms of alleged abuse – emotional, psychological and financial, among others.

This report is the result of my investigation into seven sexual assault allegations against Swami Mahadevananda. Reports on other allegations will be finished by August 2020.

In the course of the investigation, I reached out to the Executive Board Members (the “EBM”) and Swami Mahadevananda to hear their version of events. Despite my repeated efforts, no one responded to my request to conduct interviews.

I also requested that the EBM expand the mandate of the investigation being conducted by Mme. Marianne Plamondon to include allegations against Swami Mahadevananda because Mme. Plamondon would have access to the EBM and to official documents that I did not have. However, there was never a formal answer with instructions for Mme. Plamondon to follow up.

It would be much better for the Sivananda community to have the responses of the EBM and Swami Mahadevananda included in this Report. But since the EBM did not respond to my requests for interviews and they have also declined to do their own investigation into the allegations against Swami Mahadevananda, this Report can only set out my conclusions based on discussions with the survivors of his alleged misconduct and the corroboration that was available.

I investigated allegations that:

- 1) Swami Mahadevananda sexually assaulted a number of women; and
- 2) the EBM were aware of these assaults as early as 2000.

Without access to the EBM’s version of the facts, I can only make a limited conclusion.

I conclude that:

- the reports of the women who came forward with accounts of sexual assault are extremely credible;
- the pattern of sexual misconduct described by the women and corroborated by others is quite specific and indicates a high degree of credibility.
- a credible witness has alleged that she brought the issue of Swami Mahadevananda’s sexual misconduct directly to the entire EBM in 2000 and that Swami Mahadevananda admitted the violation; however, it appears that nothing was done to prevent his sexual misconduct from reoccurring. Indeed, all the allegations within my investigation involve incidents after 2000 up to 2010.

The Sexual Misconduct Allegations Against Swami Mahadevananda

Seven women reported that Mahadevananda either sexually assaulted and/or exposed his genitals to them.¹ Specifically, that he:

- a. masturbated in the presence of a woman and then ejaculated on her arm;²
- b. fondled several women's breasts as they leaned over to deliver emails or faxes to him;
- c. exposed his genitals in the presence of several woman who were serving him;
- d. made comments about women's breasts and in one case, her brassiere;
- e. asked to see a woman's breasts; and
- f. asked to see a woman naked.

There were also allegations that the EBM and other ISYVC leaders knew about this sexual misconduct beginning in 2000 and failed to act. In 2013, Swami Mahadevananda retired, allegedly with a pension provided by the ISYVC.

The Definitions of Sexual Assault and Indecent Exposure

The meaning of the phrase 'sexual assault' can be different in different jurisdictions. I am using a commonly accepted definition of sexual assault as "any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient." All of the situations that I describe here allege sexual contact and/or sexual behavior without consent of any kind.

'Indecent exposure' is generally described as deliberately exposing a private part of one's body in public and can be classified as an assault if there is physical contact during the exposure.

In addition to the legal and moral issues of sexual assault and indecent exposure, I understand that swamis take a vow of celibacy or renunciation and that engaging in

¹ These women will remain anonymous. The process of making allegations of sexual misconduct within a community where people are frequently silenced and judged negatively for those complaints is often difficult. Anonymity provides some refuge and has nothing to do with truthfulness. The women are not anonymous to me – I have spoken directly to and corresponded at length with all of them, except Survivor #6, a circumstance which I note further in this Report.

² I received a highly credible report of another sexual assault with this *exact* pattern of abuse -- that of Mahadevananda deliberately masturbating in front of a woman. I do not include it here in this section because I was not able to make contact with her by the publication date of this report. For the full account, [See, The Allegation that the EBM Was Aware of Sexual Misconduct in 2000](#) (pg. 8 of this Report).

these acts of misconduct may well violate the *brahmacarya* and *sannyas* initiations. Further, everyone is asked to observe celibacy at an ashram.

The Details of the Sexual Assault Allegations

Survivor #1 - 2000

Survivor #1 was serving Swami Mahadevananda when he received a phone call that there was a fax for him at the ashram office. He was working at his desk when he asked her to go to collect it for him. Survivor #1 estimates that she was gone for just a few minutes and when she returned, she said that Swami Mahadevananda had removed all of his clothes and was lying on the bed completely naked.

She ran out of the room and was subsequently reassigned to other duties that did not require her to interact with him. She recalls that when Swami Mahadevananda was teaching an ATTC, he said something to the effect that, "When a holy man does something to a woman, she doesn't know it is for her own good." Survivor #1 felt that this was his excuse for sexual violations.

She was relieved that she did not have to serve him anymore and she did not tell anyone at the ashram. However she told a friend shortly after the incident and that person corroborated details consistent with her story.

Survivor #2 - 2001

Survivor #2 was asked to take a fax to Swami Mahadevananda. She entered the room where he was seated and when she leaned over to give it to him, he groped her breast. Several months later she said she mentioned this incident to Swami Durgananda who took it very lightly and laughed, saying it was "just a bit of hazing."

Survivor #3 - 2001

Survivor #3 worked serving Swami Mahadevananda as a cook in his household. She reported that he frequently appeared completely naked in her presence and the presence of others and that this was disturbing to her. During this time, when she was cooking in his kitchen, he would come and sit cross-legged on the floor in a way that made it impossible for her to avoid looking at his exposed genitals. In addition, he commented in an inappropriate way on her brassiere.

Survivor #4 - 2003

Survivor #4 served Swami Mahadevananda for several years. During that time, he would occasionally slap her on the buttocks and stare intensely at her breasts. He often put his arm around her shoulder and his hand would come too close to her breast. On several occasions, he called her into his bedroom where he would be lying on the bed clad only in underpants. When she refused to look at him or get too close, he laughed at her. Occasionally he would stand uncomfortably close to her.

On one occasion, he asked her to sit close to him on a sofa and he put his arm around her. She felt frightened and uncomfortable. She clearly remembered that she froze out of fear and she very quickly left the room.

Survivor #5 - 2006

On two occasions, Survivor #5 alleges that Swami Mahadevananda asked to see her breasts. At the time, they were talking about emails and other business matters so there was no question of any mistaken romantic interest. He said, "Can you take your shirt off? I want to see your breasts." She was shocked but she tried to laugh this off and make a joke of it. On both occasions she remembered she said something like, "You don't want to do that, come on, you're a swami."

One day, in 2006, she came to see him with emails that she had printed out for him, as was her usual practice. She entered and saw his breakfast had been set up on a tray on the kitchen table.

Swami Mahadevananda called out to her to bring his breakfast tray to him. She complied and brought the tray into the main room where his bed and desk were. She remembered that he was sitting up in bed wearing a white kurta with a blanket covering his legs. While she stood by the side of the bed holding the tray with both hands, he pulled back the blanket quickly with one hand, and took hold of her one arm firmly, so she could not move away, with the other hand. Then he masturbated himself, and finally ejaculated on her arm.

She put down the tray and went into the bathroom to clean herself off. He also came into the bathroom and cleaned up his genitals. He did not speak to her. He did not explain himself. He expressed no shame, no guilt and no respect for her. He acted, she said, as though she were nothing more than a piece of the furniture.

After she left his room, she went to speak to Prahlada. "Prahlada was," Survivor #5 said, "the person you went to speak to about 'big things'."

Survivor #5 recounted that she told Prahlada what happened and that she wanted to go to the police. But, she told me, Prahlada said, "Don't do that. We are trying to get him counseling. He is sick." Eventually, she came to feel that these were excuses for what was in essence an assault.

Shortly thereafter she was offered a free month of teacher's training. When she returned to India after this incident, she reported that Swami Mahadevananda became verbally abusive to her, constantly criticizing her and screaming at her. As far as she could tell, from 2006 until 2013, when the EBM announced that he had retired, nothing was done about Mahadevananda's sexual misconduct.

Sometime in 2012, a friend of Survivor #5 who knew about the 2006 assault told her that Lanny Alexander, a lawyer for the EBM, was asking about women who might have been assaulted by Swami Mahadevananda. The friend inquired whether Survivor #5 would like to talk with Ms. Alexander, who appeared to be doing an investigation. Survivor #5 never responded to Ms. Alexander; she knew her to be a person with deep ties to the EBM and did not trust her independence. She had already told Prahlada and six years later nothing had been done.

Survivor #6 - 2007

I reviewed a letter written to the EBM by Survivor #6, after Julie Salter's Facebook post.³ It stated that in 2007 while she was a karma yogi in service to Swami Mahadevananda, he entered her bedroom in the middle of the night and asked to see her naked. She wrote that she did not feel that she could protect herself. She was in a foreign country, she could not escape him, no one else was around and there was no one to call for help. Further, Swami Mahadevananda was the authority and the representation of the spiritual path that she had chosen. So she acceded to his demand.

The following day, according to her letter, something else happened to which she acceded for the same reasons; she did not elaborate. The letter also said that earlier she had been subjected to his unwanted touching of her buttocks and inappropriate comments. While these situations made her very uncomfortable, she felt that she was able to manage them. She had spoken to Prahlada about these situations and he had assured her that she would not receive any more threats or demands of a sexual nature.

Survivor #6 also wrote that at one point an influential woman within the ashram came to her because she was concerned for an Indian woman and her daughter who cleaned Swami Mahadevananda's rooms. Survivor #6 became worried that women who relied upon the ashram for work might be at risk. She felt that others beside Prahlada were aware of Swami Mahadevananda's inappropriate actions.

³ Normally, I do not share a survivor story when I have not personally interviewed the survivor. However, in this case, I felt that circumstances of the writing of her letter and the similar pattern that she describes lend credibility to her allegations.

In 2010 or 2011 at Val Morin, Survivor #6 said she spoke to Swami Swaroopananda about what had happened to her with Swami Mahadevananda. She did not want to harm Swami Mahadevananda, she said, but she felt that he needed help. Swami Swaroopananda said that he would ask for guidance in meditation and deal with it.

However, according to the letter, Swami Swaroopananda must have told Mahadevananda what Survivor #6 told him, because Swami Mahadevananda came to her and verbally attacked her and ordered her to leave Val Morin.

She felt that she was not the one who had done anything wrong so she decided to stay. She reported that Prahlada was aware of the attack and he encouraged her to stay. Prahlada advised her that it would pass and that he had seen the same behavior from Swami Mahadevananda before. Kanti Devi was sent to talk with her and she questioned whether Survivor #6 had been clear in her communication with Swami Mahadevananda.

Having made a decision to leave, Survivor #6 eventually went to speak with Swami Mahadevananda. He said that he trusted she understood that “he had simply been teaching [her] detachment in his actions” and that she should take her time before returning so that she “was at ease with his situation.”

Survivor #6 expressed regrets that she had not been stronger and done more to ensure that others were not subjected to Swami Mahadevananda’s abuse. Her letter to the EBM was her way of doing that.

Survivor #7 2010

Survivor #7 had been a long time member of the Sivananda community when she asked to go to India. This was in 2009 or 2010. Once there, she began to serve Swami Mahadevananda.

On a number of occasions, she said he came into the room where she was working and he was completely naked. Once he put his arm around her while he was naked and she felt trapped. She had been abused as a child and she was triggered and re-traumatized. She became very frightened. On another occasion, he touched her breasts as she leaned over to give him something. Another time he asked her to sit on his lap.

This was extremely troubling to Survivor #7. But when she told one of the staff about what had happened, the woman, apparently referring to Survivor #7 and others, said, “You brought it on yourselves.” Eventually, she refused to cook for him. The woman who replaced her told her later that the same thing had happened to her.

Survivor #7 was approached later, perhaps in 2012 by Lanny Alexander who advised her that she was investigating allegations of sexual misconduct against Swami Mahadevananda. Survivor #7 was aware of three or four other women who alleged that they had been abused but not all of them participated in Ms. Alexander’s

investigation. Survivor #7 remembers that she told Ms. Alexander that the worst part was that she felt sure that the EBM had known about his misconduct for many years but had done nothing to keep women like her from being harmed.

Analysis

In conducting an investigation, I consider the following:

1. **Credibility:** When assessing credibility, I am alert to evasiveness, inconsistency, any evident bias, any motive to lie, the inherent plausibility of the allegation and the level of detail.

Each of the women I interviewed was clear and consistent in her account. Several of them had told someone about their experience in prior years. None appeared to have any vested interest in coming forward now, other than for their experience to be known to others and their wish to protect other women from having to go through what they went through.

In all cases the women I interviewed were frank about what they did and did not remember clearly and they reviewed the statements that are in this report for accuracy. A number of women expressed their concern for Swami Mahadevananda and their respect for his work. Some reported that they had told members of the EBM about what happened in the hope of putting an end to the behavior.

2. **Corroboration:** It is common in allegations of sexual misconduct that there are no witnesses. However, often the person alleging abuse has made a contemporaneous (or later) account to a family member, friend or colleague. When there was someone or something else that could corroborate an allegation, and if I could get access to that person or document, I pursued it.

In these seven cases, there were several forms of corroboration. A number of survivors spoke to friends after the incidents and those people corroborated their stories. One woman had emails which indicated that she had discussed the incident with a friend. Another woman was a witness to an interaction between Mahadevananda and one of the survivors.

3. **Patterns of behavior:** When the stories told by unrelated accusers (as is the case here) establish a pattern of misconduct, it is a strong indication that the allegations are true. It is quite unlikely that women in different places at different times, who have little or no connection, have 'concocted' the same or similar stories or have conspired together to lie. In many cases of sexual misconduct, the pattern of behavior is the most persuasive evidence that sexual assault has occurred.

In this case, there appears to be an exceptionally distinctive pattern of sexual misconduct. Of the seven women that reported sexual misconduct, the following patterns emerged:

- Two of the women spoke of Swami Mahadevananda's frequent and deliberate exposure of his genitals, while a third woman described his deliberately calling her into his bedroom clad only in underwear.⁴
- Two women reported that he slapped them on their buttocks.
- Two women alleged that Swami Mahadevananda asked them to take off their clothing so that he could see their breasts.
- Two of the women reported that he would stand very close behind them while he was naked. One reported that while she was cooking, he would sit cross-legged on the floor so she would have to see his genitals. Another woman reported that he would laugh at her because she would avert her eyes to avoid seeing his genitals.
- Two of the women independently described incidents in which his behavior seemed done to provoke shock or surprise. One woman reported that while he was working at his desk, she left for several minutes; when she returned he had removed his clothes and was lying naked on the bed. Another woman reported that he asked her to bring a breakfast tray to him, showed her he was masturbating, forcibly detained her and then ejaculated on her arm.
- Two of the women alleged that he fondled their breast while they leaned over to give him a business document.

The Allegation that the EBM Was Aware of Sexual Misconduct in 2000

A number of the survivors whose stories are above, allege that they spoke to various members of the Executive Board. Survivor #5 remembers being told, "Don't go to the police. He's sick." Survivor #6 wrote about speaking to members of the Executive Board in 2010 or 2011. Another witness informed me that she had personally spoken to a member of the Executive Board. There was a strong sense among the survivors and witnesses that "everyone knew".

I interviewed a person who did not have allegations of sexual misconduct of her own but rather, reported a sexual misconduct allegation that she received to the EBM (the "Reporting Witness").

⁴ A woman who was at the ashram in 1985 also confirmed to me that she saw Swami Mahadevananda standing naked in a public space being bathed by an Indian woman who worked at the ashram. She observed that Swami Mahadevananda was not disabled and was certainly able to bathe himself and that he was close to the bathhouse when she saw him. But instead he stood in a public place with an employee washing his naked body.

The Reporting Witness was a member of the EBM in 2000. She told me that she reported to the entire EBM the following incident of Swami Mahadevananda's sexual misconduct:

She received a phone call at night from a woman who was at an ashram with Swami Mahadevananda. The woman was very upset. She told the Reporting Witness that Swami Mahadevananda had appeared in the ashram office naked late at night when she was alone and masturbated in front of her.

The Reporting Witness phoned Swami Mahadevananda. She said that he admitted the conduct and said, "Mind your own business." When she said she was going to bring it up at the next EBM meeting, he said in essence, "Do what you have to do".

At the next EBM meeting, the Reporting Witness said that she relayed this incident to the EBM. In her recollection, Swami Mahadevananda said, "It's true. If she doesn't want me to do it again, I won't". The EBM accepted his statement and moved on to other matters. The Reporting Witness questioned why nothing more would be done. One of the members reportedly said to her, "He's already said he's not going to do it anymore. Why are you attacking him? Why are you so negative?"

The Reporting Witness's perspective was that Swami Mahadevananda needed help and the EBM should have made sure that he got help. The Reporting Witness also felt he should not be in a position where he could harm someone again.⁵ However, several months later, while the Reporting Witness was in a remote country without internet, she was voted out of the EBM and given an inferior position that she did not accept. Consequently, she left the community.

I spoke to a long time member of the Sivananda community who verified that very close in time to this meeting, the Reporting Witness told her the same story that she told me: that she had addressed Swami Mahadevananda's behavior with the EBM and they had ignored her.

Analysis

Credibility: The Reporting Witness was credible. She had a clear and consistent recollection of the woman who reported the sexual misconduct to her, of her phone call to Mahadevananda and the EBM meeting.

Corroboration: The Reporting Witness's account, that she told the EBM about the sexual misconduct of Swami Mahadevananda, was corroborated by two other interviewees who told me that she described the meeting and the EBM's failure to act to each of them very shortly after the event.

⁵ Even though there was no touching involved, the masturbation as alleged meets the definition of sexual assault I have used, i.e. "any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient" but according to the statement of the Reporting Witness, this behavior was not acted upon.

Pattern of Behavior: Many women, including the Reporting Witness and several of the survivors recounted instances in which they told the EBM or other leaders within the ISYVC of Mahadevananda's sexual misconduct but that nothing was done until 2013 when he retired.

The ISYVC Policy on "Sexual Harassment & Violent Behavior" in Centres

In 2006, it appears that new ISYVC policies were promulgated related to sexual harassment and violent behavior in the Centres. The policy I reviewed was not dated but the heading indicates that it applies to the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres. It says in relevant part:

"In accordance with this policy, the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres prohibit staff, swamis, instructors, outside presenters and teachers, students and any other guests at the centre/ashram from engaging in sexually suggestive remarks or gesturing, and unnecessary and offensive touching."

However, an email that I reviewed from 2006 indicates that Swami Mahadevananda "does not think the policy needs posting up, we can have it for use in difficult situations but we do not need to go towards this commercial (sic) world type thinking....That following the teachings has all the answers (sic) one needs.

While there may have been a policy written in 2006, the policy seems not to have been taken seriously and the very foundation of the policy (protection against sexual harm) was considered unnecessary.

Conclusions

I conclude that the allegations made by each of the women are credible, supported by corroboration and show a strong, recognizable pattern of misconduct. I also conclude that the allegations that the EBM knew of Swami Mahadevananda's sexual misconduct in 2000 and in subsequent years and yet failed to take any action to prevent the harm done to *at least* seven additional women are credible.⁶

The allegations portray a sustained pattern of sexual abuse and misconduct by Swami Mahadevananda over many years, as well as a pattern of the EBM failing to take action on credible claims, when investigations and corrective action would have protected numerous women. If true, it displays an attitude of indifference and a disregard for boundaries and important social norms.

⁶ Several women expressed concern for local Indian women employed at the ashram many of whom may have been harmed but would have no opportunity to come forward.

If the EBM is aware of Swami Mahadevananda's misconduct and has known about it since 2000, they need to begin a process of educating themselves and repairing the harm that has been done to the women involved and the entire community.

If, in the face of this credible evidence, the EBM does *not* believe the allegations, they should either expand the mandate of Mme Plamondon's investigation to include Swami Mahadevananda or retain a neutral third party like FaithTrust Institute to complete this investigation and to share the results with everyone in the wider Sivananda Yoga community.

**Part 2: Institutional Betrayal and its Impact on Survivors:
A Summary of the Personal Stories of Survivors**

Dr. Josna Pankhania

Introduction

In February 2020, I was appointed by Project SATYA to hold a safe space for survivors to enable them to tell their stories of abuse - sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, and others, within the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Community (ISYVC). At the same time, Carol Merchasin was appointed by Project SATYA to conduct an investigation into reports of sexual misconduct.

This report presents the personal stories of the survivors of Swami Mahadevananda's alleged abuse. They describe sexual, psychological, social, spiritual and financial abuse. They clearly express the trauma survivors have suffered, and continue to experience, to varying degrees. Some of these survivors have allegations of abuse against other Swamis, too. These will be included in the next report.

In this report, I outline the interview process, offer brief definitions of different types of abuse and institutional betrayal and then present extracts from the personal stories of the survivors of Swami Mahadevananda's abuse. The complete personal stories of these survivors will be presented in the final report.

Interview Process

The interview process used a trauma informed framework, drawing on best practice from counselling and therapy spheres, with a firm understanding of the impact of trauma and its recovery. This approach recognizes the complexity of trauma and understands the dynamics of power within a hierarchical organisation, and the potential for abuse in guru/disciple, teacher/student relationships.

Trauma informed approach recognises...

- The prevalence of complex trauma and its impact on the emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of people in yoga communities.
- The dynamics of power and the impact of abuse within a hierarchical yoga organisation with charismatic leaders.
- The power of guru/disciple, yoga teacher/student relationships and the potential for abuse within these relationships.
- The systemic and cultural dynamics of power and abuse as it relates to the yoga communities.
- The gendered dimensions of abuse.

Drawing on my counselling expertise to establish rapport, I set out to listen actively and empathetically, and offer unconditional positive regard. I worked with the core principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice (the women were given choices about the process involved, what they wished to share, and what was to be included in the report), collaboration and empowerment. I aimed to ensure that every interaction

through the interview process was consistent with recovery, and reduced the possibility of re-traumatization, given the prevalence of violence and abuse and its impact on the lives of people. Interviewees were offered control over what they brought to the interview and at what pace. I aimed to be non-directive and ensure emotional and psychological safety, recognizing and understanding the emotional, social, psychological and physiological impact of trauma and at the same time, being responsive to the social and cultural contexts which shape survivors' needs and healing pathways. I made appropriate referrals when necessary.

The initial interviews were carried out jointly by Ms Carol Merchasin and me. Carol, as an experienced investigative lawyer focussed on sexual abuse and misconduct claims, and I focused on psychological, cultural, systemic dimensions. As a counsellor and psychotherapist, and a radical ethnographic researcher, and human rights advocate, I created a trauma informed space for the interviewees.

Interviewees were offered the opportunity to give their testimonies anonymously, and we engaged in listening actively and empathetically.

The interviews varied from person to person but often involved as many as three to five further sessions with the interviewees as well as a series of email exchanges. The next step was to assist them to put together their statements. This was done via Zoom, and followed up by phone calls and emails, where I sought clarification.

The aim of each session was to offer the interviewee a safe, non-judgemental space to make sense of their experiences.

Different Types of Abuse

What follows is an overview of the types of abuse common in society. These illustrate the types of abuse reported by the survivors, who would have experienced one or more of these, but not all. A brief description of the theories that underpin a trauma informed framework is also given.

Behaviour that causes harm to an individual is considered abuse, and can be categorised into a number of different types:

- Sexual Abuse
- Psychological Abuse
- Financial or material abuse
- Discriminatory abuse
- Organisational abuse
- Neglect
- Physical abuse

Sexual Abuse includes:

- Rape
- Indecent exposure
- Sexual harassment
- Inappropriate looking or touching
- Sexual teasing or innuendo
- Sexual photography
- Subjection to pornography or witnessing sexual acts
- Sexual acts to which the individual has not given consent or was pressured into
- Sexual acts where there can be no consent because of an imbalance of power

Psychological Abuse includes:

- Emotional abuse
- Threats of harm or abandonment
- Deprivation of contact
- Humiliation
- Blaming, controlling and intimidating behaviour
- Intimidation and coercion
- Restricting personal choice and refusing to respect privacy
- Harassment
- Verbal abuse
- Cyber bullying
- Isolation
- Unreasonable and unjustified withdrawal of services or supportive networks

Financial or material abuse includes:

- Theft
- Fraud
- Coercion in relation to an adult's financial affairs or arrangements
- Forced labour and domestic servitude

Discriminatory abuse includes forms of harassment because of:

- Race
- Gender
- Gender identity
- Age
- Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Religion

Organisational abuse includes:

- Inappropriate use of power or control
- No flexibility in daily routine
- Lack of personal clothes and belongings

- Stark living environments
- Deprived environmental conditions
- Illegal confinement or restriction
- Being spoken to with disrespect
- Inflexible services based on convenience of the organisation's leaders, rather than the needs of the individual
- Inappropriate physical intervention
- Removal from the establishment with no discussion with appropriate people or agencies, because of staff inability to manage behaviour (such as mental illness)

Neglect includes:

- Ignoring medical, emotional or physical needs
- Failure to provide access to appropriate health care and support, or educational services
- Withholding the necessities of life, such as medication, adequate nutrition and heating

Physical abuse includes:

- Assault
- Hitting
- Slapping
- Pushing
- Restraint or inappropriate physical sanctions

Betrayal Trauma

It is essential for children to experience bonds of affection with other individuals, particularly those on whom they depend. It is, indeed, a necessary part of their survival process to attach themselves to their caregivers. When those caregivers perpetrate violence on them, the result is betrayal trauma (Bernstein & Freyd, 2014). In order to preserve the relationship with the caregiver, a victim will sometimes erase the memory of abuse from their conscious awareness. Freyd refers to this as adaptive amnesia or disassociation. Betrayal trauma can be as a result of physical, emotional or sexual abuse inflicted upon a child, and the closer the relationship, the greater the experience of betrayal. The impact on the victim ranges from depression, substance abuse, shame and more profound mental health issues (Bernstein & Freyd, 2014).

Several of the survivors were already survivors of childhood abuse and trauma before they entered the organisation, and as such they were extremely vulnerable to the dynamics of power that existed there.

Institutional Betrayal

According to Smith and Freyd (2014) Institutional Betrayal occurs when an imbalance of power exists in an organisation, and where this power is used to perpetrate abuse on an individual. It includes the failure to respond when a victim seeks help in the situation, the institution seeing reputation and status as more important than the well-being of the person seeking help. Indeed, a victim is often punished in some way for reporting their abuse, and the result is additional trauma, causing further emotional and physical health problems. Such betrayal experiences have been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, as well as substance abuse (Freyd, no date).

<https://theconversation.com/when-sexual-assault-victims-speak-out-their-institutions-often-betray-them-87050>

Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J. (2014). Institutional Betrayal. *American Psychologist*. 69(6). 575-587. dx.doi.org/10.1037/a003756

Impact of Institutional Betrayal on Sexual Trauma

Research indicates that when traumatic experiences are interpersonal, the resulting damage is greater, and when betrayal is perpetrated by a trusted person on whom the victim is dependent, then the results are particularly profound. Whilst the victim may suppress any memory of abuse, the physical and psychological symptoms indicate their negative impact. If this abuse occurs within the context of an institute, which then fails to support the victim, then the resulting post-traumatic stress is significantly increased (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd (2013) have developed the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ) to measure institutional betrayal regarding sexual assault. The IBQ is designed to measure institutional betrayal that occurs leading up to, or following a sexual assault (e.g., [The institution] "... created an environment where sexual assault seemed like no big deal"; "... responded inadequately to reports of sexual assault"). A copy of this is included at the end of this report (Appendix I)

Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2013). Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 26. 119-124.

DARVO

The acronym, **DARVO**, conceptualised by Freyd (1997), describes the reaction of abusers when confronted by the victim. It stands for Deny, Attack and Reverse Victim and Offender. According to Freyd, the abuser will deny the abuse ever took place, become threatening, following which they will then propose themselves as the victim, and the victim as the offender.

Aspects of this were evident in the stories of a number of victims, where they were led to believe that it was something in their behaviour that was the problem, not the behaviour of the abuser.

Freyd, J.J. (1997). Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory. *Feminism and Psychology. Vol 7.* 22-32.

The following two links are included here to offer further resources on some of the issues raised in this report, such as the dynamics of power, control and abuse. The first gives reference to Matthew Remski's book, *Practice and all is Coming: Abuse, Cult Dynamics and Healing in Yoga and Beyond*, and the second is an extensive reading list on cults and their influence.

<https://embodiedwisdom.pub/paaic-resources/>

<http://cultresearch.org/recommended-reading/>

Survivors Personal Stories and Impact Statements

The personal stories of the survivors of Swami Mahadevananda's abuse will be presented in the final report. What follows here is a brief overview of the experiences they reported and the impact on survivors.

Every one of the survivors represented here has alleged that they have suffered sexual abuse from Swami Mahadevananda. They all reported being overworked to the point of exhaustion, often beginning the working day at 6 am and working till 9.30 pm, for 7 days a week. There was no remuneration, no pension and little support when medical attention was required, despite the fact that to their knowledge, large amounts of money were being received by the organisation. If they tried to object or question in any way, they were often treated in a way that felt humiliating and cruel. Sometimes they were physically removed. They were socially isolated, family visits were limited, and visits to friends not allowed.

They each felt betrayed by an organisation that they felt should have had their physical, spiritual and emotional well-being as a priority, instead of which it seemed to turn a blind eye to the actions of the perpetrators, and turn its anger on the survivors, as if they were the wrongdoers.

As a result, survivors have suffered ill-health, suicidal tendencies and depression.

Below are extracts from the personal stories of the survivors of Swami Mahadevananda's abuse. Survivor #6 statement is from her own letter to the EBM.

Survivor #1

Impact Statement

The immediate impact of the Mahadev incident was shock, distress, disgust, followed by blanking out. I didn't want to relive painful, fearful memories from my past. The long term impact was that I lost respect for him and I had concerns about his behaviour and attitudes towards women, but I did not dwell on this. It reinforced a lack of trust in men and it was disheartening that this was perpetrated by a Swami and a director of a spiritual organisation, a member of the Executive Board, one of the long-term and oldest disciples of the founder and Guru (at that point I did not know of abuse perpetrated by founder). I had thought highly of Mahadev up until then. It made me more cautious while I was at the camp and I was concerned about my son's safety, in case anyone at the camp should abuse him. I recall telling him (I think he was only 7), that he must never go with anyone, without my permission, even if they were a Swami and even if he knew them.

The impact of reading Julie's testimony in her own words, and the testimony of Pamela, Lucille and others who have come forward, has been devastating. It was still hard for me to reconcile the Guru I met and served with the man who abused these women. Over the months, I have come to accept that he failed and was false, being a Swami while abusing women. Further testimonies of abuse by Mahadev and Prahlad in particular, was deeply upsetting and depressing. A sanctuary that I thought was so good, was far worse than a few rumours that I had heard and now felt sordid and fake. I am sad and disappointed that things have turned out this way. I know we are all human and none of us are perfect, but there are ethics and boundaries that need to be in place in any organisation. I am now thinking, I ought to have left long ago, but I was so attached, I hung on until now.

Survivor #2

I experienced social, emotional, psychological, spiritual and financial abuse over the years I was staff. I felt over worked and burnt-out, with health issues from 2002 to 2005, when I was staff at the Paris centre.

Sexual abuse:

Mahadevananda committed sexual assaults on me and was considered a "good" spiritual teacher.

Social abuse:

I was asked not to see my friends, and if they visited me in the yoga centre, I was not meant to be available to them. Visits and contacts with my family were asked to be reduced to a very minimum.

Emotional abuses:

I spent many days in suffering, crying a lot without any support. I was considered as a spiritual challenge to start spiritual life. I remember feeling despair, lost and lonely. Both in India 2001, and France 2002 to 2005.

Psychological abuses:

My passport was locked in the safe of the Paris centre, to prevent me from escaping, in 2001.

I could not behave freely, as I felt and liked. I had to behave the way the Swamis asked. It meant losing my natural closeness, empathy and friendliness toward other students. I was told I was being too natural and talking too much, being too generous with my time and food or others...from 2002 to 2005.

The highest point of trauma was how I was asked to silently and secretly leave in 2005, as I did not accept fully obeying and surrendering to one of the swamis.

Spiritual abuses:

I am angry now discovering that Sw Vishnu was not a realised saint, that his disciples made of him a self-realised man.

Financial abuses:

Overwork, with no minimum wage or paid holiday for 4 years, 2001 to 2005.

No payment of any pension from 2000 to 2005. It puts me in a difficult financial situation now, as I cannot afford to pay for extra pension. It means that my pension

payment has a "hole" from 1999 to 2006, and that I will suffer financial consequences from this hole when I am old.

Recovery

I have undertaken psychotherapy from 2007 to 2010 to recover my self-confidence, as soon as I earned money.

Survivor #3

Reflections

I guess the most important immediate impact of working for Sw. Mahadev was that when my instincts/intuition said something was “not right” or “off” with the situation, of working for a naked swami, I put that in the back seat, because others, who were seemingly more spiritually advanced than me, appeared to be alright with it. I think it has been damaging to not listen to my inner voice, and instead, go with the flow. As a person who was truly trying to find their way in this world, an important step was to begin to listen.

Hearing about the abuses of others in the organization was devastating to me. I could actually get over the abuses of Sw. Vishnu more easily if the EBM admitted to knowing about it. Their response has been a dealbreaker for me. I was already aware that SVD was verbally and emotionally abusive to people, although I came around after his death, I heard many stories from his disciples, and they seemed to condone it or explain it away in some form. So, in that sense, I never took him on as my personal guru, and chose instead to be inspired by Swami Sivananda. I was completely shocked to find out there was also sexual abuse in his repertoire. Nevertheless, I believed Julie Salter’s testimony completely, along with the others that came forward after. Hearing about Prahlada was the most devastating, because I thought I knew him very well, and had served at the Camp for several summers, and had taken my young niece to classes at the Toronto Center, for visits at weekend retreats with Prahlada and his family and even to Kid’s Camp. To hear that he was accused of abusing a young girl stunned me. I immediately felt shame that I brought my young niece to a place that harbors abusers like this, because of my own denial. Again the response of the EBM, who apparently knew about this before, but did nothing is beyond reprehensible.

I am grieving the loss of family. Since December, I have been preoccupied, distracted, trying to process all of this information in a healthy way. I am angry, not only at the perpetrators of all the abuse, but at the bystanders for allowing it to continue, and then covering it up. How dare you? You say that you are living a spiritual life, it is all a farce. I know that at this point, the people on the EBM have a lot to lose, have all their chips in, so to speak, and it is difficult at this stage to surrender it all, and do the right thing, but it is what you must do. Most of you call yourself renunciates, it is time to give it all up, let truth prevail and healing begin.

Survivor #4

The impact of this abuse was that I left the ashram.

I left feeling even more vulnerable. My mental, psychological, emotional, even my physical health was not good. I was exhausted and confused. So I left the ashram. I did not feel safe there anymore. There was no support for me at all.

Me leaving had other consequences. I found it hard to manage in the outside world. We were taught that ego was bad. We were told that over and over, to destroy our ego, and so when I was in the outside world, I could not function. I also did not have anywhere to go to. I was staying on people's sofas and spare rooms. And what work could I do? I did some jobs that were hard and made some money and returned back to another Sivananda ashram and I went through that cycle many times over. Living on people's sofas, doing some menial hard job, making some money and then returning again, and there, going through the endless routine of exhausting karma yoga, getting burnt out and running off to the outside world. I did this many times. Back and forth, back and forth. Working with no breaks, being publicly humiliated, put down, shouted at, getting exhausted, getting burned out and leaving and going back again because I could not cope outside.

My final break was when they tried to force me to make a commitment that I would stay permanently, they said that they would look after me and I found out that they were not even prepared to help me when I needed some medical assistance and so I just left.

I have not really got over this. I have never had therapy. My self-esteem is still not good. I still struggle in society. I am trying to value myself more now. It took me a good few years to integrate back into society. It was a hard landing ...hard landing in the world. After some years I realized that I was not vulnerable anymore, I was standing in my own power. I am now following another path where I feel safe and secure.

When I read Julie's testimony, it felt very familiar and I knew she was saying the truth. I left by time the Julie's testimony came out. When I read it ... it sent me through deep trauma. I had offered everything at Swami Vishnu's feet. I have had trauma in the past and the trauma from my time in this organization. People go to Sivananda ashrams for healing of their traumas and they get further traumatized there. That is what happened to me. I am glad that the medical emergency finally caused me to leave, that I am no longer in a place which traumatizes people.

Survivor #5

Impact of Mahadev's Incident

I was left feeling degraded and exposed to an ugliness within the ashram life which I never expected, and had no mental preparedness for. I was very unhappy for some years after the assault even though it was not, luckily, overtly physical and obviously not penetrative sex. I was not physically injured. During the incident and afterwards, Mahadev's dismissal of me, as a person with any personal rights, or as a staff member with a right to fair treatment, and his dismissal of any further value I might have been adding in the organisation in my role as a yogi, really hurt my self-esteem and made me question my yoga practise. At the deepest level, it denigrated my idea of karma yoga as selfless service, as I felt I had become simply a tool for the swamis to use, and mostly it changed entirely my idea of Guru. The swamis in India used "Guru's Grace" as a byword for everything that happened. They would regularly reply to any complaint or concern about anything, including the assault I faced, that it was the energy/spiritual force of Swami Vishnu Devananda (SVD)/Kuttan Nair, as Guru, it was his Guru's Grace – i.e. karma. And that Guru had brought me into this (in my case abusive) situation as a matter of spiritual grace?! This never made sense to me, and I often argued about this often repeated cliché – that we were all part of SYVC ONLY because of "Guru's Grace", that guru being SVD. Somehow all the horrible things that happened, and the assaults were some kind of opportunity for me to grow spiritually, learn, evolve!

But this is pure gaslighting – behaving abusively, criminally, cannot be sold as a positive action, as something they are "inspired" to do in order to be transformational for me. Not in a positive way. In fact, their behaviour - for which they don't accept responsibility (as all actions are seen to be the result only of Guru's Grace) - has no relation to Yoga or Yamas and Niyamas which assume an act of will, an act of ethical choice in yoga practitioners' behaviours and actions. Although it needs to be stated here, that their Guru, Swami VishnuDevananda, is said to have been an abuser with uncontrollable anger issues.

Where I am at today

I am happy and strong where I am today. I live a good life in a safe place in Europe and have come to terms with the abuse and unkindness I faced at the Ashram.

Survivor #6

Because Survivor #6 was not able to write her statement, I (Josna Pankhania) have taken the following from her own letter to the EBM

According to her letter to the EBM, the impact of Swami Mahadev's sexual abuse on Survivor #6 was profound and extensive. These sexual assaults triggered a severe health crisis in her; she learned of the connection between the sexual assaults and the health crisis, she said, through the therapy she received.

After her assault, this survivor embarked upon a gruelling and at times, debilitating journey in search of health and peace. In her letter, she outlines details of the painful wounds inflicted upon her in the sanctity of a place of spiritual retreat. Like many, she went to Sivananda Yoga ashrams in search of healing for her childhood trauma, but there she was traumatised further.

In her letter to the EBM, this survivor's compassion shines through, as does her intelligence and deep awareness of the dynamics of power, control and abuse. Her ethical and moral integrity is ever-present.

Fearlessly, she dropped the veil of ignorance and set off on her own search of truth and authenticity.

I would like to say a lot more about this case but in the end, no words can undo the harm that was inflicted on this beautiful and extraordinary woman.

Survivor #7

Here I am in the early morning, writing to you again with tears rolling down my face.

I think that it is a positive thing to do, to let go. I realise that life is about letting go of things that hold us back from becoming truly alive, and to serve in the best way possible. On this planet, in this very small life that is a part of the whole.

I have been slowly crying at all the abuse that I have experienced over this span of 63 years. 20 of those I served in the Sivananda organisation, where I was terribly bullied, physically hit, shouted at, ostracised, and touched up on a level that should have helped me to realise to go, to leave. But I had nowhere to go. Even though I tried to report it, the level of cover-up was so big by those that had also been touched up etc by Swami Mahadevananda.

Eventually, I chose to leave because I was stuck and I was never really understood. I realised that I would not be heard or understood by the people in charge, in this lifetime.

I thought of killing myself several times and still do at times now. But the death would be of moving on in this life, without maybe understanding, without being heard...

I think that the idea of being a Sannyasin in the Sivananda organisation is a joke. It can be a crutch for people to feel safe to hold onto or take. For me, now, it is important to serve humanity in the best way that I can. The best way is not someone telling me how and why I can and should serve humanity. I decide how and why.

Appendix

Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ)

Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd (Department of Psychology, University of Oregon) have been developing the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ) to measure institutional betrayal regarding sexual assault. The IBQ is designed to measure institutional betrayal that occurs leading up to or following a sexual assault (e.g., [The institution] "... created an environment where sexual assault seemed like no big deal"; "... responded inadequately to reports of sexual assault"). The IBQ also measures identification with the institution and prompts for a description of the institution involved. This version of the IBQ is meant to be administered following some measure of traumatic or undesirable experiences. The instructions refer to these experiences when asking about institutional betrayal. We expect to continue to develop this instrument. Please check back here for the latest information.

The Institutional Betrayal and Support Questionnaire or IBSQ also integrates questions about institutional support that may occur related to a traumatic experience. Currently, the IBSQ is being used to measure institutional betrayal and support related to campus sexual assault and adds eight items such as "[Did the institution play a role by] ... Meeting your needs for support and accommodations?" that allow supportive behaviors that may occur in addition to betrayal.

The Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire - Health or IBQ-H was created based on the IBQ to capture institutional betrayal in healthcare institutions such as hospitals, clinics, and insurance companies. This version (IBQ-Healthcare or IBQ-H) directs respondents to consider medical and healthcare institutions where negative medical experiences (e.g., prescription errors, surgical complications) occurred and asks about institutional betrayal related to those experiences.

IBQ Version References

IBQ.1

Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2013). Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26, 119-124.

IBQ.2

Based on Smith & Freyd (2013) and first presented in Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J.J. (2017). Insult, then injury: Interpersonal and institutional betrayal linked to health and dissociation. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*, 26, 1117-1131, [DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2017.1322654](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2017.1322654)

IBSQ

Based on Smith & Freyd (2013) and first presented in Rosenthal, M.N., Smidt, A.M., & Freyd, J.J. (2016). Still second class: Sexual harassment of graduate students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40, 364-377.

IBQ-H

Based on Smith & Freyd (2013) and first presented in Smith, 2015, [*First do not harm: Institutional betrayal in health care. Smith doctoral dissertation, 2015.*](#) [Smith dissertation published as: [*Smith, C. P. \(2017\). First, do no harm: Institutional betrayal and trust in healthcare organizations. Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare.*](#)]

Project SATYA

Sivananda
Accountability
Truth Seeking
Yogic Action

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Dr. Josna Pankhania is a counsellor and psychotherapist accredited with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Josna currently works as a senior caseworker for an Australian state-wide counselling service that supports women and children experiencing violence and abuse. As a member of the Satyananda Yoga community, Josna has been working towards healing, truth and justice in this community since, in 2014, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse exposed cases of child sexual abuse within this yoga movement.

