

Sexual Abuse and Rape Culture in Modern Transnational Yoga - Case Study: Sivananda Yoga

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Over the past decade, victims/survivors have streamed forward to report sexual violence within the modern transnational yoga context, creating a distinct survivor movement: #metooyoga. Despite a growing body of victim/survivor narratives and investigative documentation, discussion of sexual abuse perpetrated by revered figures is conspicuously absent within the wider yoga community and scholarship. Further, the topic is often actively hidden, denied, and shut down by practitioners and devotees, especially when their guru is implicated.

Rape culture refers to commonly held beliefs and attitudes which serve to both deny and rationalize instances of male sexual aggression against women. It is argued that these attitudes create a hostile social climate toward victims/survivors of sexual violence, the net effect of which is to deny or minimize the perceived injury, blame victims for their own victimization, and shift sympathy to the male accused. While discourse on rape culture has primarily remained a secular feminist endeavour, this paper articulates the connections between persistent rape culture logics and weaponized spiritual teachings and attitudes within the yoga context.

Reports of abuse by once beloved gurus and spiritual teachers have elicited rage, denial, gaslighting, spiritual bypassing, smear campaigns, and defamation lawsuits from their former yoga communities and the business arm of the tradition. Given this multiply burdened social climate, understandably, many victims waited decades before going public with their experiences of sexual abuse when they were young women and, in some cases, children. To date, few have received any accountability, truth-telling, compensation, or repair in response to their disclosures. In contrast, nearly all accused and their yoga empires have continued business as usual, largely exempt from critical analysis by yoga scholars, practitioners, or the broader culture in which yoga has received amnesty.

Angela Gollat holds an MA in Social Justice Studies and Women and Gender Studies at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, and is a co-organizer of Project SATYA, a survivor solidarity movement investigating sexual abuse in Sivananda Yoga. She is currently working within the public health sector to address up-stream causes of gender-based violence, and lectures on global reproductive justice within Lakehead University's Gender and Women's Studies Department.

Author: GOLLAT, Angela (Lakehead University)

Presenter: GOLLAT, Angela (Lakehead University)

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