

BITE Model applied to the 3HO-Kundalini Yoga cult of Yogi Bhajan

Yogi Bhajan, who hijacked the name Kundalini Yoga to give his yoga status and lure with it, and proclaimed he was the Spiritual Leader of the Sikhs of the Western Hemisphere, was, in fact, a fraudulent businessman with political and religious connections in the highest ranks, a self-declared master of everything with pompous made-up titles, a cult leader who exploited his devotees for his own benefit, who isolated, starved, abused, and groomed children, raped women, insulted gay people, cheated, lied, evaded taxes, dealt with drugs and weapons, deprived devotees of their life savings, threatened opponents with death - a crook in a mean disguise.



By Els Coenen - February 2023

In 1968, Yogi Bhajan, a 39-year-old Punjabi Sikh and former customs officer at New Delhi's airport, arrived in the US from India. He claimed to be part of an ancient "golden chain" of Kundalini Yoga masters with no references other than his own. In fact, Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan, is [his creation](#), a pastiche of breathing and yoga exercises that he copied from others without crediting them. He wove Sikh mantras into the body of his yoga. He converted his followers to his warped version of Sikhism. Good-looking, imposing in stature and appearance, smart and entrepreneurial, he quickly built a cult following. By the time he died in 2004, his business ventures were recording hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.

[3HO](#) is the acronym used for the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization, the first non-profit organization he founded in 1969. Bhajan reigned as an authoritarian and all-knowing spiritual leader over his fast-growing, worldwide empire for nearly 40 years. 3HO's mission today, as stated on their site, reads: "to inspire everyone everywhere to realize their full potential through the uplifting experience of Kundalini Yoga." It reflects the sense of superiority that thrives within 3HO. Due to the controversy that has been unfolding over Yogi Bhajan's misdeeds since early 2020, the suffix "as taught by Yogi Bhajan" has been dropped.

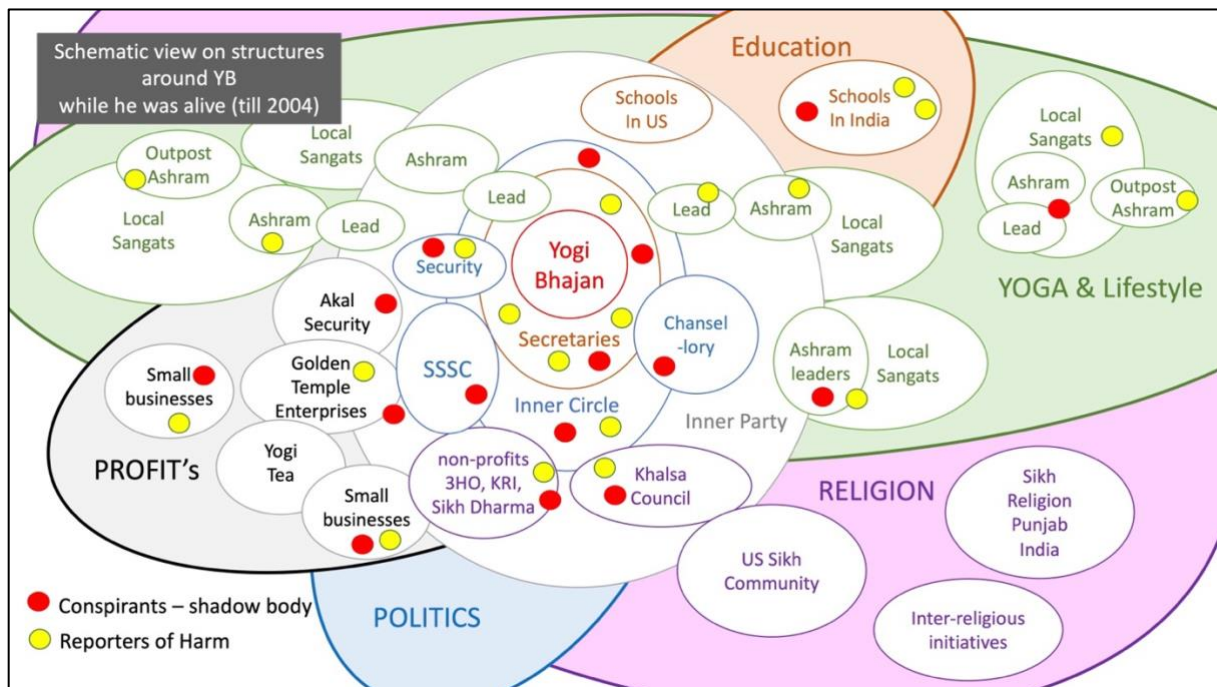
The name 3HO is often mistakenly used to refer to the entirety of Yogi Bhajan's empire. The name of the real umbrella organization, the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation ([SSSC](#)), is less well-known. Siri Singh Sahib is one of the honorary titles YB coined for himself. The SSSC oversees all non-profit organizations, such as 3HO, [3HO Europe](#), the Kundalini Research Institute ([KRI](#)), the International Kundalini Yoga Teachers Association ([IKYTA](#)) that officially recognizes 25 national federations, Sikh Dharma International ([SDI](#)), and all the profit-making entities, such as the multibillion-dollar companies Yogi Tea and Akal Security.

The [dark side of the history](#) of Yogi Bhajan's 3HO cult was hidden for decades. In early 2020, this all changed with the release of [Pamela Saharah Dyson's](#) book *Premka. White Bird in a Golden Cage. My Life with Yogi Bhajan*. For sixteen years, until 1985, she served as 3HO's Secretary General. After decades of silence, her testimony of Bhajan's shameless power abuses encouraged many to speak up and share their traumatic 3HO experiences finally.

The [abuse-in-kundalini-yoga.com](#) site paints a picture of the diversity, nature, and extent of the abuse, wrongdoings, and crimes committed in YB's cult. A broad view of it helps to recognize this cult's devious design. It shows how Bhajan abused his yoga, 3HO lifestyle, and religion as effective tools to bring and keep his followers under his spell. They were a cover, a pious veil, behind which he could hide what really mattered to him: power and control over every aspect of

his followers' lives. He exploited them to enrich himself and abused them in many ways to satisfy his greed and increasingly perverse sexual needs.

The representation of Bhajan's relationship with the different entities in his empire in visual⁹ below is undoubtedly incomplete and not fully correct. Still, it gives an idea about the situation's complexity and the broad reach he had.



⁹ Inspired by the visuals cult expert [Dr. Alexandra Stein](#) uses in her book *Terror, Love & Brainwashing* to explain the structure of a totalitarian system.

Structures, organizations, and responsibilities constantly changed and remained elusive and unclear to outsiders. Even to those close to him, he managed to compartmentalize many aspects of the world he created so that only he knew what was going on. Most atrocities took place in the “Inner Circle” and boarding schools in India. The further removed from these places, the less visible and palpable were the effects of the dark practices.

Despite his sickening and criminal behavior, he remained an enlightened being and inspiring spiritual leader to many, either because they really did not know or because their devotion to him blinded them.

Some of YB's followers in leadership positions copied his exploitive and/or sexually abusive behavior. A few of his key business lieutenants involved in criminal activities were convicted and jailed. Bhajan was never caught.

About the scope of this BITE Analysis

In early 2023, a study from cult expert [Dr. Alexandra Stein](#) entitled [Report on Themes and Impacts of 3HO Childhood](#) was released. She drafted it in response to a request from a group of second-generation adults. Using quotes from in-depth interviews, it illustrates the “key themes” of the allegations from the former 3HO kids: separation from parents, neglect, abuse, coercion, isolation from the mainstream, and grooming for adult roles.

Dr. Stein argues that 3HO was and is a cult. She writes: “... after his (Yogi Bhajan's) death, the group has apparently loosened up and may now be moving away from at least some of the (cult) elements listed (in her report).”

The BITE analysis below covers the period from Bhajan's arrival in the U.S. in 1968 until he died in 2004. There is ample information available from this nearly forty-year period to conduct this exercise. Hundreds of (ex-)3HO members, adults, and children who lived in ashrams openly shared experiences about their daily lives immersed in the 3HO lifestyle and the traumatic events that profoundly affected their lives. We do not know how many people joined 3HO between 1968 and 2004, nor what the attrition rate was. It is estimated that roughly 1,000 children went to boarding schools in India during this period and suffered from the horrible conditions there. A former secretary of Yogi Bhajan estimates that he sexually abused around 100 women.

When Bhajan died in 2004, there were about 300 ashrams worldwide, 4,000 yoga teachers, a dozen companies, and \$1 billion in government contracts in the Akal Security business (source: Los Angeles Times. [A Yogi's requiem](#). Oct 23, 2004.). After his death, a huge [battle](#) broke loose over his legacy and succession, resulting in several lengthy and complicated lawsuits.

Today, the board of the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, the [SSSC](#), overlooking all non-profit and for-profit entities, is divided between deniers and believers of the abuse by their spiritual leader. In mid-2020, [EPS](#), the office of Ethics and Professional Standards, published an independent report on the allegations of sexual abuse by Yogi Bhajan. An Olive Branch, a Buddhist-inspired group of experts on ethical issues in spiritual settings, did the investigation. The [AOB report](#) concluded that "... based on reports of harm from 36 people, the investigation concludes that it is more likely than not that Yogi Bhajan engaged in several types of sexual misconduct and abused his power as a spiritual leader."

Since the release of this report, the yoga-related non-profit organizations [3HO](#), [KRI](#), and [IKYTA](#) have made significant efforts to build a new image that pushes Yogi Bhajan into the background. Their websites, newsletters, and video messages no longer show white yogis in the cult uniform: long white robes and white turbans, including veils for the ladies. Instead, the people depicted are now more ethnically diverse, wearing colorful clothing. Turbans are now less and less common, and hair may be curly, wavy, or short.

Sikh Dharma International [SDI](#) and SSSC still openly praise and revere Yogi Bhajan. The disclosures seem to have less financial impact on them. Yogi Tea removed Bhajan's quotes and pictures years ago due to the lawsuits related to the company's property rights. In the early years, 3HO members worked long hours for community businesses at low wages so that they could proliferate with above-average profits. Today, these companies are more likely to pay appropriate wages and abide by standard labor rules.

The situation of another successful profit entity, Akal Security, is more obscure. Over the years, they dealt with different lawsuits related to exploitation, and in 2017 they were involved in separating migrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexican border. Since then, the company appears to have largely disappeared. This is an astonishing development for a company that until recently billed the US government hundreds of millions of dollars to protect federal and state buildings and facilities.

In the early 2020s, with the release of the book *Premka* and the #MeToo zeitgeist, many abuse stories from decades ago surfaced. Large schisms appeared within the worldwide 3HO-Kundalini Yoga community. People responded in a [multitude of ways](#).

As varied as people's reactions were, few invested the time and energy needed to understand what took place behind the scenes for decades. They might have read [Premka](#), participated in Listening Tours organized by 3HO, or listened to a few [Uncomfortable Conversations](#) podcasts.

Unfortunately, a surface exploration of these abuses rarely goes far from enough to give a well-informed answer to the question, "Can I separate this teacher from his teachings?" Many seem to be saying, "Yes, I can. Let us not throw away the baby with the bathwater. This yoga is needed so much by so many. Stop whining about the past. We want to move forward." If they knew the

extent of the abuse and crimes that went on behind the healthy-happy-holy scenes, they might come to different insights. Therefore, it is important to keep telling the stories in many ways and on different platforms. This yoga and 3HO lifestyle have all the elements for mind control and undue influence to happen again.

What follows is the BITE Analysis. As mentioned, the analysis looks at the period of the 3HO cult while Bhajan was alive. To do the same for the period after his death, we would need a wealth of stories as we have for the period from 1968 to 2004. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Therefore, for the situation as it is today, we can only endorse the viewpoint of Dr. Alexandra Stein. She pointed out in her [report on 3HO childhood](#) that after Bhajan died, there have been some incremental improvements, but there are certainly elements of cult culture still alive.

BITE Model Analysis

[Link to illustrations that clarify the reasoning behind the assigned colors.](#)

- Green – does not apply to anyone in the group
- Orange – partially applies to members of the group
- Red – absolutely applies to all members

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I. Behavior Control	1968 - 2004
1 Regulate individual’s physical reality	Red
2 Dictate where, how, and with whom the member lives and associates or isolates	Orange
3 When, how and with whom the member has sex	Orange
4 Control types of clothing and hairstyles	Red
5 Regulate diet - food and drink, hunger and/or fasting	Red
6 Manipulation and deprivation of sleep	Red
7 Financial exploitation, manipulation or dependence	Red
8 Restrict leisure, entertainment, vacation time	Red
9 Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals and/or self-indoctrination including the Internet	Red
10 Permission required for major decisions	Orange
11 Rewards and punishments used to modify behaviors, both positive and negative	Red
12 Discourage individualism, encourage group-think	Red
13 Impose rigid rules and regulations	Red
14 Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding	Orange
15 Threaten harm to family and friends	Orange
16 Force individual to rape or be raped	Orange
17 Encourage and engage in corporal punishment	Orange
18 Instill dependency and obedience	Red
19 Kidnapping	Orange
20 Beating	Orange
21 Torture	Orange
22 Rape	Orange
23 Separation of Families	Red
24 Imprisonment	Orange
25 Murder	Orange

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II. Information Control	1968 - 2004
1 Deception:	Red
a. Deliberately withhold information	Red
b. Distort information to make it more acceptable	Red

c. Systematically lie to the cult member	Red
2 Minimize or discourage access to non-cult sources of information, including:	Red
a. Internet, TV, radio, books, articles, newspapers, magazines, media	Red
b. Critical information	Red
c. Former members	Red
d. Keep members busy, so they don't have time to think and investigate	Red
e. Control through cell phone with texting, calls, internet tracking	Orange
3 Compartmentalize information into Outsider vs. Insider doctrines	Red
a. Ensure that information is not freely accessible	Red
b. Control information at different levels and missions within group	Red
c. Allow only leadership to decide who needs to know what and when	Red
4 Encourage spying on other members	Red
a. Impose a buddy system to monitor and control members	Orange
b. Report deviant thoughts, feelings, and actions to leadership	Red
c. Ensure that individual behavior is monitored by group	Red
5 Extensive use of cult-generated information and propaganda, including:	Red
a. Newsletters, magazines, journals, audiotapes, videotapes, YouTube, movies and other media	Red
b. Misquoting statements or using them out of context from non-cult sources	Red
6 Unethical use of confession	Red
a. Information about sins used to disrupt and/or dissolve identity boundaries	Red
b. Withholding forgiveness or absolution	Red
c. Manipulation of memory, possible false memories	Red

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III. Thought Control	1968 - 2004
1 Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth	Red
a. Adopting the group's 'map of reality' as reality	Red
b. Instill black and white thinking	Red
c. Decide between good vs. evil	Red
d. Organize people into us vs. them (insiders vs. outsiders)	Red
2 Change person's name and identity	Red
3 Use of loaded language and clichés which constrict knowledge, stop critical thoughts and reduce complexities into platitudinous buzz words	Red
4 Encourage only 'good and proper' thoughts	Red
5 Hypnotic techniques are used to alter mental states, undermine critical thinking and even to age regress the member	Red
6 Memories are manipulated and false memories are created	Orange
7 Teaching thought-stopping techniques which shut down reality testing by stopping negative thoughts and allowing only positive thoughts, including:	Red
a. Denial, rationalization, justification, wishful thinking	Red
b. Chanting	Red
c. Meditating	Red
d. Praying	Red
e. Speaking in tongues	Green
f. Singing or humming	Red
8 Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism	Red
9 Forbid critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy allowed	Red
10 Labeling alternative belief systems as illegitimate, evil, or not useful	Red
11 Instill new "map of reality"	Red

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IV Emotional Control	1968 - 2004
1 Manipulate and narrow the range of feelings – some emotions and/or needs are deemed as evil, wrong or selfish	Red
2 Teach emotion-stopping techniques to block feelings of homesickness, anger, doubt	Red
3 Make the person feel that problems are always their own fault, never the leader’s or the group’s fault	Red
4 Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness, such as	Red
a. Identity guilt	Red
b. You are not living up to your potential	Red
c. Your family is deficient	Red
d. Your past is suspect	Red
e. Your affiliations are unwise	Red
f. Your thoughts, feelings, actions are irrelevant or selfish	Red
g. Social guilt	Red
h. Historical guilt	Red
5 Instill fear, such as fear of:	Red
a. Thinking independently	Red
b. The outside world	Red
c. Enemies	Red
d. Losing one’s salvation	Red
e. Leaving or being shunned by the group	Red
f. Other’s disapproval	Red
6 Extremes of emotional highs and lows – love bombing and praise one moment and then declaring you are horrible sinner	Red
7 Ritualistic and sometimes public confession of sins	Orange
8 Phobia indoctrination: inculcating irrational fears about leaving the group or questioning the leader’s authority	Red
a. No happiness or fulfillment possible outside of the group	Red
b. Terrible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc.	Red
c. Shunning of those who leave; fear of being rejected by friends and family	Red
d. Never a legitimate reason to leave; those who leave are weak, undisciplined, unspiritual, worldly, brainwashed by family or counselor, or seduced by money, sex, or rock and roll	Red
e. Threats of harm to ex-member and family	Red

Places where Survivor Testimonies can be found:

REPORTS

- [Report on Themes and Impacts of 3HO Childhood](#) - by cult expert Dr. Alexandra Stein. Made public in January 2023.
- [AOB report](#) – An Olive Branch report. An independent investigation was ordered by the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, the SSSC, to investigate the allegations of sexual abuse against Yogi Bhajan. August 2020.

SITES WITH STORIES AND INTERVIEWS

- [RishiKnots](#) website and [@RishiKnots](#) Instagram account – stories and comments from children born and raised in 3HO Sikh Dharma Kundalini Yoga to serve survivor advocacy. Active since 2008.

- [Uncomfortable Conversations. The Untold Stories of the 3HO Kundalini Yoga Community](#) - interviews with 3HO survivors, witnesses, and experts hosted by GuruNischan, born and raised in the community. Active since November 2020, 50+ episodes.
- [Discussing Abuses in Kundalini Yoga Community](#) – interviews with 3HO survivors and experts hosted by Mina Bahadori. 30+ episodes. From July 2020 to November 2020. (On her Instagram Account, go to reels – series ‘discussing abuses’.)
- [Beyond the Cage – The 3HO Yogi Bhajan Kundalini Yoga Aftermath](#) – a private Facebook group where survivors share their stories and find support from each other. It started in early 2020.
- [Kundalini Yoga/3HO Cult Info](#)
- [abuse-in-kundalini-yoga.com](#) – an overview of the diversity, nature, and extent of the abuse and misconduct using extracts of testimonies and other sources of information. Including a ‘Media’ page with more references. Launched in April 2021.

BOOKS

- [Premka. White Bird in a Golden Cage](#) – Pamela Saharah Dyson (2020).
- [The Inner Circle – Book One: My Seventeen Years in the Cult of the American Sikhs](#) – Peter Blachly (2021).
- [The Bone Mother: A Memoir](#) – by Rose Khalsa (2021).
- [Sikhism and Tantric Yoga](#) – Dr. Trilochan Singh (1977).